



From October to Brest-Litovsk

Leon Trotsky

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For much of the 20th century, the struggle between capitalism and communism was one of the central dramas, and the figure of Leon Trotsky stood for many on the political left as a reminder of a road not taken. Along with Vladimir Lenin, Trotsky led the October Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and held crucial posts in the early Soviet governments, but after Lenin's death Trotsky was exiled, persecuted and finally murdered at the behest of his arch-rival, Joseph Stalin. For the final decade of his life, Trotsky was a man trapped in between two worlds. A communist seeking refuge in the capitalist West, Trotsky was deemed a secret agent of the capitalist powers by Stalin's propaganda, but the Soviet Union's enemies also viewed him with suspicion.

For those inclined to believe the Soviet experiment had started promisingly but gone astray, Trotsky became the embodiment of the betrayed promise of the early Bolshevik revolution. There were certain ironies in this widespread sympathetic interpretation of Trotsky's legacy. For the Marxists and Marxist sympathizers appalled by Stalin's paranoid police state, Gulag concentration camps, and strict suppression of dissent, Trotsky was viewed as a humane and cosmopolitan opposite to Stalin. But Trotsky himself had overseen and spearheaded campaigns of persecution against Russians suspected of "counterrevolutionary" leanings, and he had written a long tract defending these "terroristic" measures as necessary safeguards of the revolution.

One reason Trotsky is remembered so differently is that he had a greater intellectual and cultural sophistication than Stalin, including a positive disposal toward the avant-garde movements of the 20th century arts and a strong interest in Einstein's physics and Freud's psychoanalysis. In the early post-revolutionary Soviet Union, avant-garde art, literature, and cinema flourished, but under Stalin artists were obliged to hew to the tenets of "socialist realism," which in practice often led to kitschy, idealized paintings and films celebrating collective farm workers operating tractors and combine harvesters. However, Trotsky's more cosmopolitan refinement and sympathy for "Western" artistic and intellectual trends lent itself to insinuations that he was a Western capitalist sleeper agent and something less than a true Russian. Trotsky's Jewish origins provided further cause for suspicion among Russian nationalists.

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