

Trotsky in the Ascendant [1954]

THIS REVIEW WAS first published as “Trotsky’s Tragedy”, *The Observer*, London, 21 March 1954, p. 8 and reprinted as “The Trotsky Tragedy”, *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 28 March 1954, “Sunday Magazine”, p. 3 (B&R C54.07). Russell had initially declined an offer to appraise the first instalment of Deutscher’s three-volume biography, on account of his impending surgery. But he hoped that the newspaper’s editor, David Astor, “could let the review stand over until I am again fit for work ... ” (19 Jan. 1954).

The Marxist intellectual, Isaac Deutscher (1907–1967), had a fascination with Trotsky dating back to the early 1930s and his own experiences of anti-Stalinist opposition in the Polish Communist Party. In 1932 he was expelled from the Party he had joined as a teenager six years previously, following a strict Jewish upbringing in Kraków. Deutscher arrived in Britain in 1939 knowing little English, but he had become by the end of the Second World War a respected journalistic authority on European affairs. Henceforth, he moved from reportage to historical writing and published his first major work, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, in 1949. By absorbing Gibbon, Macaulay and Trevelyan—all much admired by Russell for their literary flair—Deutscher also honed the rich and metaphorical prose style that stamped his *oeuvre* as much as the deep-seated, if idiosyncratic, Marxist convictions underpinning it. Even Deutscher’s critics—and he had many—acknowledged his literary gifts, although these talents were suspected of providing a seductive cover for his doctrinaire views and questionable methodology.

In thanking Russell for his “generous” review, Deutscher added:

You are in that almost unique position that in writing on the Russian Revolution and Stalinism you might justifiably indulge in a certain amount of self-righteousness and say “I told you so”. All the more remarkable is the intellectual disinterestedness, rare even among the very great, which prevents you from adopting any such posture—remarkable at a time when, after a long bout of moral prostration before Stalinism, it is the ideological fashion of the West to feel morally superior to the Russian Revolution in all its phases and to deny it any merit whatsoever.

You will, I trust, forgive me if I add that I do not think that the Communists in Russia have reproduced “*all* the evils of the régime against which they rebelled (100: 29–30)”. They have reproduced and indeed

“vastly intensified (100: 29)” some of them, but they have also greatly mitigated others and have done some pioneering work in various fields of social life, which, when it is divorced from Stalinist cruelty and crudity, may be of the greatest significance to mankind. (24 March 1954)

Russell sparred with Deutscher in his reply, saying that he would be “glad to hear in what respects you think that the Communists have done good in Russia. I think of industrialization, collectivization, and the diminution of illiteracy, but I cannot feel sure that any of these have really done any good” (26 March, 1954).

This correspondence opened an acquaintance which lasted until Deutscher’s sudden and premature death in 1967. The previous year he had become the first person to accept an appointment to Russell’s International War Crimes Tribunal and was an active participant in this unofficial investigation of alleged American atrocities in Vietnam. The two men occupied much common ground, despite Russell’s record of opposition to the Soviet Union and his philosophical mistrust of all historical schemata, Marxist or otherwise. Most fundamentally perhaps, both men valued their status as “heretics”—critics of leftist orthodoxy who had nevertheless remained loyal to the truly progressive currents of the twentieth century—as opposed to the “renegades” lambasted by Deutscher in another work reviewed by Russell (Paper 26), who had retreated from commitment to conformity. Russell’s respect for Deutscher’s scholarship is easy to comprehend. For all the latter’s professed historical materialism, he was a devotee of biography who, like the Whig historians esteemed by both men, attached great weight to the role of individual agency in human affairs. It was a source of frustration to Deutscher that he laboured as an independent scholar rather than an academic historian. Russell was only too glad to comply when approached by Deutscher in May 1955 to write on his behalf for a lectureship at the London School of Economics. But he remained outside the academic profession throughout his career, an exclusion which one short biographical study has hinted was “political” (Singer 1971, 49).

On 18 March 1954 Russell passed proofs of the article sent by *The Observer*, agreeing to the one substantive emendation suggested by the newspaper’s literary editor (see A98: 37). The copy-text is the typescript carbon, dated 8 March 1954 and made from the dictated manuscript in Edith Russell’s hand (RAI 220.021000).

The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879–1921. By Isaac Deutscher. London: Oxford University Press, 1954. Pp. xii, 540.

THOSE WHO HAVE read Mr. Deutscher's book on Stalin have been looking forward eagerly to his promised work on Trotsky of which the present volume is the first half. For my part I find this book even more interesting than its predecessor, admirable as that was. An enormous mass of research, some of it in very obscure sources, has gone into the making of the book, but at no point has it been allowed to outweigh the human and political interest of the events with which it deals, not only as regards Trotsky, but also as regards many of the other characters in this complex and passionate drama. Especially interesting is the account of the varying relations between Trotsky and Lenin and the interplay of their differing characters and capacities. The book ends with Trotsky at the summit of outward success, but the last chapter, which is called "Defeat in Victory", shows how already, under the imminent pressure of events, Trotsky had suffered an inward capitulation to a kind of régime which he had abhorred while it was only in prospect and which through his theoretical capitulation facilitated the hardening monolithic terror of Stalin's rule. The story is almost unbearably tragic both publicly and in the mind and heart of Trotsky. It has the inevitability of Greek tragedy and it is very difficult to say: "At this point a different choice should have been made, and here was the first fatal decision that led to disaster." At every moment there were considerations that could not but seem imperative impelling the Bolshevik régime towards totalitarianism and tyranny. Trotsky foresaw the danger and at times spoke against it with powerful eloquence and prophetic insight, but events drove him resistlessly along the very road against which he had warned the Revolution.

Trotsky is, to my mind, more interesting as a human being than any of the other prominent figures of the Russian Revolution including Lenin. He had not, until the last years of his success, that narrow absorption in politics and Marxist theory which makes Lenin seem like a dry embodiment of abstract propositions. He was in youth a good mathematician and Mr. Deutscher relates the regret of one of his mathematical teachers that he did not devote himself to research on that subject. He read widely and took great interest in purely literary criticism. Art also strongly appealed to him. He was not at first at all absorbed by political interests. His father was that then somewhat rare being, a Jewish farmer, who by dint of hard work became a Kulak. Nobody in his home ever read a newspaper. He first came into contact with Marxism in a small discussion group which gradually resolved itself into an argumentative duel between him and an ardent Marxist young woman who provoked him into the exclamation, "A curse upon all Marxists and upon those who want to bring dryness and

hardness into all the relations of life!" The young woman swore that she would never shake hands with him again. Nevertheless, he married her shortly afterwards and, with reservations, adopted her creed, but he never ceased to be interested in literature and history from a human as opposed to a Marxist point of view. His thinking, especially in times of stress, showed a deep intuitive insight of the sort that comes from human sympathy and not from theory.

Trotsky possessed a very unusual combination of fiery eloquence with organizing ability. For a long time, both in the Revolution of 1905 and in the early days of the later Revolution, these two capacities worked in harmony; but from the outbreak of the civil war onwards, the organizer more and more outweighed the orator. He found himself repeatedly in situations in which harshness seemed imperative. His creation of the Red Army was an incredible feat and without it the Revolution could not have been saved. But having employed conscription successfully in war, he went on to apply it in industry, defending forced labour and the complete subordination of trade unions to the State. I do not think it is possible to doubt the complete sincerity of his idealistic and democratic convictions until the moment when they ceased to be compatible with the domination of the Communist Party. Mr. Deutscher points out that no Socialists, whether in Russia or elsewhere, had considered what should be done if, after the Revolution, the majority turned against its authors. This was what happened in Russia, and the Communists decided that they must stay in power although this involved the suppression of democratic freedom. I think that most of them, including certainly both Lenin and Trotsky, were entirely honest in this decision. They are to be criticized intellectually, not morally: They did not perceive that the course upon which they had embarked led inevitably to Stalinism. All the steps in this process are traced by Mr. Deutscher with sympathy and delicate understanding. Trotsky throughout was remarkable for his candour, which sometimes outweighed his political sagacity. As late as 1919, Trotsky could still say:

These hundreds of thousands of years of man's development and struggle would be a mockery if we were not to attain ... a new society, in which all human relations will be based on ... co-operation and man will be man's brother, not his enemy. (P. 442)

But only a year later, in introducing compulsory labour, he said:

We are now heading towards the type of labour that is socially regulated on the basis of an economic plan, obligatory for the whole country, compulsory for every worker. This is the basis of

socialism ... The militarization of labour, in this fundamental sense of which I have spoken, is the indispensable basic method for the organization of our labour forces ... Is it true that compulsory labour is always unproductive? ... This is the most wretched and miserable liberal prejudice: chattel slavery, too, was productive ... Compulsory serf labour did not grow out of the feudal lords' ill-will. It was (in its time) a progressive phenomenon. (P. 501)

It was this measure more than any other that transformed Russia into a
 10 slave State. For a while during NEP its rigours were relaxed, but they were revived by Stalin who could have appealed to Trotsky as his forerunner in this policy.

The Communists in the early days of their power adopted many crucial measures, each separately defensible, but cumulatively necessitating the establishment of totalitarian dictatorship. The repudiation of Czarist war-debts and the peace of Brest-Litovsk caused the implacable enmity of the Entente; the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly put an end to the appeal to democracy; the practice of requisitions from the peasants, not of
 20 a fixed amount by way of tax, but of whatever they produced above their own bare needs, caused the Government to be hated by the peasants and drastically diminished the production of food. The Communist Party was left as a small band of armed fanatics fighting for its life against an embittered nation. The idealistic hopes of earlier times had been passionately sincere and at each step towards a new régime of iron despotism it could be argued that if this step were not taken the Revolution would end in chaos and disaster. In their early idealism, the Communists embarked upon a task in which real, as opposed to apparent, success was impossible.
 30 They sought to create a Utopia and they created instead a mighty military empire, reproducing, vastly intensified, all the evils of the régime against which they had rebelled. Trotsky embodies the tragedy of this process both in his apparent success and in his downfall.

Mr. Deutscher has written a most remarkable book worthy of his great theme.

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- 98: 3 **Mr. Deutscher's book on Stalin** Deutscher 1949, which Russell had read "with the greatest interest" (to David Astor, 19 Jan. 1954).
- 98: 31–2 **Lenin ... embodiment of abstract propositions** This phrase is redolent of the sketch of Lenin in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, drawn from the private audience with the Bolshevik leader which Russell was granted in May 1920: "He is dictatorial, calm, incapable of fear, extraordinarily devoid of self-seeking, an embodied theory" (1920, 37).
- 98: 37 **that then ... Jewish farmer** The word "then" was inserted with Russell's consent by the literary editor of *The Observer*, Terence Kilmartin, who reminded him that, "Since the establishment of the state of Israel, a Jewish farmer has become quite a common phenomenon" (16 March 1954).
- 98: 38 **Kulak** Kulaks were the stratum of prosperous peasants in the village commune or *mir* who hired labour, loaned money and leased equipment to the smaller farmers. Although land in the *mir* was held communally, Tsarist reformers before the First World War endeavoured with limited success to transform the kulaks into a conservative class of independent farmers. Devastated by the policy of War Communism from 1918–21, kulaks thrived temporarily under the New Economic Policy (see A100: 10–11).
- 98: 40–1 **an ardent Marxist young woman** Alexandra Sokolovskaya had been active with Trotsky in the Southern Russian Workers' Union and was arrested with him in 1898 for underground revolutionary activity. They married shortly before being exiled to Siberia, but when Trotsky escaped to Western Europe in 1902 with a forged passport bearing the revolutionary pseudonym under which he became famous, Alexandra remained behind with their two daughters. The separation became permanent after Trotsky met his life-long companion, Natalya Sedova, in Paris.
- 98: 41–99: 1 **"A curse ... of life!"** Deutscher 1954, 28.
- 99: 9 **Revolution of 1905** In the aftermath of military defeat by the Japanese in the Far East, the Tsarist Government was paralysed temporarily by an eruption of rural, urban and minority nationalist protest. Nicholas II was pressured by a massive general strike into promising major constitutional concessions. On the same day (30 October 1905) as this pledge was made, a Council of Workers' Deputies was established in St. Petersburg with a view to forcing more wholesale change on the reluctant autocracy. Trotsky, who had hurried to Russia from English exile, was leader of this short-lived Soviet, which disintegrated when the authorities, emboldened by splits in the opposition, arrested 190 of its members on 16 December. Trotsky was imprisoned, then banished to Siberia for a second time, before escaping to Vienna in 1907.
- 99: 13–14 **His creation of the Red Army** Deutscher 1954, Chap. 12. Trotsky had been appointed Commissar for War almost immediately after resigning the Foreign Affairs Commissariat because of his opposition to the Treaty of Brest-

Litovsk (A100: 16–17). During the Civil War years (1918–21), he was instrumental in moulding the fledgling Red Army into an efficient fighting force by the imposition of a strict military discipline and the ready employment of veterans from the Tsarist officer corps.

99: 15–17 **employed conscription ... to the State** Deutscher 1954, 487–503.

99: 20–2 **Mr. Deutscher points out ... its authors.** Deutscher 1954, 503–5.

100: 10–11 **during NEP ... revived by Stalin** The New Economic Policy (NEP) was inaugurated by Lenin in 1921 to supplant the three-year-old policy of War Communism, with its labour-conscription and forced requisitioning of peasant crops. NEP revived the free market in agriculture (although a tax on peasant production was instituted) and returned light manufacturing to private hands, while the state retained control over heavy industry, transportation, finance and international trade. Lenin wanted to stabilize the Soviet economy, but many Bolsheviks disliked the compromise with capitalism implicit in NEP and applauded Stalin's consolidation of the state sector and curtailment of all private enterprise by the first Five Year Plan launched in 1929.

100: 15–16 **repudiation of Czarist war-debts** Britain and France held between them some seventy-six percent of Russia's foreign debts, which the Bolsheviks repudiated unilaterally on 28 January 1918.

100: 16–17 **Brest-Litovsk ... enmity of the Entente** Britain, France and the United States strenuously opposed this separate peace between Russia and Germany (signed on 3 March 1918) because it allowed Germany to transfer the bulk of its military force to the West (see A151: 22–3). Allied troops were dispatched to reopen an Eastern Front while the anti-Bolshevik “White” Russian forces bitterly resented the humiliating surrender at Brest-Litovsk of vast and historically Russian territories—although these terms were ultimately rendered less severe by the eventual defeat of the Central Powers.

100: 17 **dissolution of the Constituent Assembly** The national elections of December 1917 had returned a majority for the Socialist Revolutionaries, who won nearly twice as many seats as their Bolshevik rivals. When the delegates met on 18 January 1918, Bolshevik deputies withdrew after the Constituent Assembly refused to endorse the Government's Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited People. Soldiers prevented the other delegates from reconvening the next day, and on 20 January a Bolshevik decree declared the Assembly dissolved. Thereafter, many Socialist Revolutionaries and other moderate socialists joined the emerging anti-Bolshevik opposition. Russell had not been unduly dismayed by this blatant negation of popular sovereignty, sensitive as he then was to creeping “Cabinet Caesarism” at home: “The Bolsheviks delight me; I easily pardon their sacking the Constituent Assembly, if it at all resembled our House of Commons” (to Clifford Allen, 2 Feb. 1918; quoted in Russell 1995, li).

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The typescript carbon ("CT") is foliated 1, 2–5, measures 205 × 256 mm. and shows emendations to the punctuation made by Russell in ink. The textual notes provide a collation of CT with the two-leaf dictated manuscript ("MSe"), written in pencil in Edith Russell's hand on both the recto and verso sides, and the published version in *The Observer* ("OBS").

title Trotsky in the Ascendant CT, MSe]

Trotsky's Tragedy OBS

98: 7 mass MSe] *above deleted* volume

98: 10–13 deals, not ... capacities OBS] *as for OBS except passage begins "deals. Not"*

CT] *as for CT except that the two complete sentences are inserted* MSe

98: 13 The book CT, MSe] ¶The book OBS

98: 21 say: "At CT] *replaced* say at

98: 34–6 He read widely ... to him. MSe] *inserted: first word of passage before deleted* also

98: 37 that then OBS] that CT, MSe

98: 37 being, OBS] being CT, MSe

99: 17 I do CT, MSe] ¶I do OBS

99: 28 All CT, MSe] ¶All OBS

100: 10 State OBS] state CT, MSe

100: 10 during MSe] *inserted*

100: 14 measures, ... defensible, OBS] *commas not present* CT, MSe

100: 23 The idealistic CT, MSe] ¶The idealistic OBS

100: 26 In their MSe] *after deleted* At times

100: 32 most remarkable MSe] *inserted above deleted* great