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Few political figures of the twentieth century have aroused such intensities of fierce admiration and reactionary fear as Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky. His extraordinary life and extensive writings have left an indelible mark on the revolutionary consciousness. Yet there was once a danger that his life and influence would be relegated to the footnotes of history.

Published over the course of ten years, beginning in 1954, Deutscher's magisterial three-volume biography turned back the tide of Stalin's propaganda, and has since been praised by everyone from Tony Blair to Graham Greene. In this definitive work, now reissued in a single volume, Trotsky's true stature emerges as the most heroic, and ultimately tragic, character of the Russian Revolution.

The Prophet: The Life of Leon Trotsky Details

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From Reader Review The Prophet: The Life of Leon Trotsky for online ebook

Domhnall says

This review could never presume to capture the depth and the wealth of Isaac Deutscher's massive work, let alone the complexity of Trotsky himself. My own response to the work may even misrepresent it. I can say that I never expected, when I opened it, to encounter such a remarkable character as Trotsky nor to find so much interesting and diverse material on so many topics.

Many highlights stand out in this classic biography. Firstly, Trotsky's extraordinary career as a revolutionary in Tsarist Russia, as leader of the Red Army in the Civil War, confronting a range of foreign military interventions, putting in place a foreign policy for the new regime. Secondly, the sinister procedures by which Stalin engineered the transition from democratic to bureaucratic rule. More than a few of these techniques can be seen in modern politics – see below. Thirdly, while we have to admire Trotsky's willingness to enter into the role of opposition to the soviet government which he had done so much to establish, what is really striking is the stunning damage done by Stalin to international socialism, from which the Left has yet to recover. The massacre of Chinese communists in 1927, the betrayal of the Spanish Republic, and most extraordinary of all, the astonishing capitulation to Hitler and the Nazis in 1930s Germany, which the Social Democrats might well have resisted with communist support, are just highlights in Stalin's track record of bone headed stupidity, treachery and betrayal.

By 1930 no German, French, or other communist could voice dissent from the party line; they had to accept as gospel all official pronouncements coming from Moscow. Thus every Communist party became in its own country something like a bizarre enclave, sharply separated from the rest of the nation not so much by its revolutionary purpose as by a code of behaviour which had little to do with that purpose.” [p1306]

Trotsky pointed out that to tell the Soviet masses that the hunger and the privations, not to speak of the oppression, which they endured amounted to socialism was to kill their faith in socialism and to turn them into its enemies. In this he saw Stalin's 'greatest crime', for it was committed against the deepest hopes of the working classes and threatened to compromise the future of the revolution and of the communist movement. P1382

Finally, Trotsky's fascinating investigations of the possibilities for socialism in the future. He was aware of suggestions that there might be an inner logic that led from revolution to Stalinism and he was too open minded to entirely discount the possibility. This did not lead him to reject revolutionary socialism. He resolved that, if this were the case, even so, the duty of a Marxist was to remain on the side of the poor and the weak in permanent opposition to the powers of oppression.

Very few men in history have been in such triumphant harmony with their time as Trotsky was in 1917 and after; and so it was not because of any inherent estrangement from the realities of his generation that he then came into conflict with his time. The precursor's character and temperament led him into it. He had, in 1905, been the forerunner of 1917 and of the Soviets; he had been second to none as the leader of the Soviets in 1917; he had been the prompter of planned economy and industrialization since the early 1920's; and he was to remain the great, though not unerring harbinger of some future reawakening of the revolutionary peoples ... He fought 'against history' in the name of history itself; and against its accomplished facts, which all too often were facts of oppression, he held out the better, the liberating accomplishments of which one day it would be capable. [P1248]

I have taken the following synopsis from the closing pages of Volume Three, only changing the direct quotes

by making additional paragraph breaks, so saving myself the intimidating task of summarising nearly 2000 pages of prose.

“So copious and splendid was Trotsky’s career that any part or fraction of it might have sufficed to fill the life of an outstanding historic personality.

Had he died at the age of thirty or thirty-five, some time before 1917, he would have taken his place in one line with such Russian thinkers and revolutionaries as Belinsky, Herzen, and Bakunin, as their Marxist descendant and equal.

If his life had come to a close in 1921 or later, about the time Lenin died, he would have been remembered as the leader of October, as founder of the Red Army and its captain in the Civil War, and as the mentor of the Communist International who spoke to the workers of the world with Marx’s power and brilliance and in accents that had not been heard since the Communist Manifesto . (It took decades of Stalinist falsification and slander to blur and erase this image of him from the memory of two generations.)

The ideas which he expounded and the work which he performed as leader of the Opposition between 1923 and 1929 form the sum and substance of the most momentous and dramatic chapter in the annals of Bolshevism and communism. He came forward as protagonist in the greatest ideological controversy of the century, as intellectual initiator of industrialization and planned economy, and finally as the mouthpiece of all those within the Bolshevik party who resisted the advent of Stalinism. Even if he had not survived beyond the year 1927, he would have left behind a legacy of ideas which could not be destroyed or condemned to lasting oblivion, the legacy for the sake of which many of his followers faced the firing squad with his name on their lips, a legacy to which time is adding relevance and weight and towards which a new Soviet generation is gropingly finding its way.

On top of all this come his ideas, writings, struggles, and wanderings of the period narrated in this volume. We have reviewed critically his fiascos, fallacies, and miscalculations: his fiasco with the Fourth International, his mistakes about the prospects of revolution in the West, his fumbblings about reform and revolution in the U.S.S.R., and the contradictions of the ‘new Trotskyism’ of his last years. We have also surveyed those of his campaigns which are now fully and incontrovertibly vindicated: his magnificently far-sighted, although vain, efforts to arouse the German workers, the international Left, and the Soviet Union to the mortal danger of Hitler’s ascendancy; his sustained criticisms of Stalin’s hideous abuses of power, not least in the conduct of economic affairs, especially in collectivization; and his final titanic struggle against the Great Purges.” [pp1895-1897]

We have been told that a favourite book of Tony Blair's was The Prophet by Isaac Deutscher. Indeed, that is partly the reason I decided to read it. I have selected some quotes that might account for this unexpected interest in the story of Stalin and Trotsky:

"It was in the course of this year, the year 1923, that Stalin, making full use of this system of patronage, imperceptibly became the party’s master. The officials whom he nominated as regional or local secretaries knew that their positions and confirmation in office did not depend on the members of the organization on the spot but on the General Secretariat. [p797]

"At the branch meetings the opposition’s adherents often overwhelmed the party machine by their numbers and articulateness. But when the branch meetings with all their sound and fury were over, it was the secretaries who spoke on behalf of the branches, who handled the resolutions adopted, and who decided whether to suppress them or not, and, if not, how much currency to give them. Once a secretary had been confronted with the unmanageable temper of one meeting he prepared carefully for the next meeting, packed it with his men, and ruled out or silenced the opposition. [p821]

"The debate was to be concluded by the holding of the thirteenth party conference. The preparations for the conference were also in the hands of the secretaries. The election of delegates was indirect and proceeded through several stages. At every stage the secretaries checked how many of the sympathizers of the opposition were elected; and they saw to it that they were eliminated at the next stage. It was never disclosed how many votes were cast for the opposition in the primary cells of Moscow. The Forty Six claimed, without meeting with denial, that at the regional conference, which was the tier above the primary cells, they had obtained not less than 36 per cent. of the vote; yet at the gubernia conference, the next tier, that percentage dwindled to 18. The opposition concluded that, if its representation had been whittled down in the same proportion all the way from the primary to the final elections, then the opposition had behind it the great majority of the Moscow organization. This was almost certainly true, but the secretaries were on top of the majority." [p821]

These techniques are readily reflected in the way Britain's Labour Party has conducted affairs recently, and probably also in the US Democratic Party's selection of Clinton as candidate for the 2016 presidential elections. People on the left of the spectrum in England's Labour Party, are accused of being Trotskyists. The label seems curiously anachronistic and suspect, but it makes more sense when we appreciate that the people using that label are not democrats, but latter day Stalinists. This should not be thought to mean they are communists. The lesson I take from Trotsky, and commend to others, is that democracy can be manipulated and utterly distorted by techniques which Stalin adopted but probably did not invent and which others (despite radically different political values) have continued to exploit. This point is actually taken up within the text: that Stalin's totalitarian regime was not specifically communist or socialist, but entailed a reversion to social structures characteristic of the Tsarist past and identifiable in capitalist societies of Europe and the United States.

Stalinism was the product not of revolution or Bolshevism but of what had survived of the old society—this accounted for Stalin's pitiless struggle against the old Bolsheviks, a struggle through which the primordial barbarity of Russia was taking revenge on the progressive forces and aspirations that had come to the top in 1917. Moreover, Stalinism was the epitome of all the 'untruths, brutality, and baseness' that made up the mechanics of any class rule and of the state at large... the defenders of bourgeois democracy, were therefore hardly entitled to feel morally superior: Stalinism was holding up to them their own mirror, even if it was partly a distorting mirror.[p1795]

*Bruno Rizzi, ...in a little noticed but influential book, *La Bureaucratisation du Monde*, published in Paris... was the original author of the idea of the 'managerial revolution', which ... many others were to expound later in far cruder versions. ... Just as feudalism was followed not by Equality, Liberty, Fraternity, but by capitalism, so capitalism was being followed not by socialism but by bureaucratic collectivism. The Bolsheviks were 'objectively' just as incapable of achieving their ideal as the Jacobins had been of realizing theirs. Socialism was still utopia! The workers inspired by it were once again cheated of the fruits of their revolution. In so far, Rizzi went on, as bureaucratic collectivism organized society and its economy more efficiently and productively than capitalism had done, or could do it, its triumph marked historic progress. It was therefore bound to supersede capitalism. [p1821] ...bureaucratic collectivism was the last form of man's domination by man, so close to classless society that bureaucracy, the last exploiting class, refused to acknowledge itself as a possessing class... The argument whether the U.S.S.R. was a workers' state or not was often only a quibble—Rizzi had at least the merit of having 'raised it to the height of historical generalization'. He identified bureaucratic collectivism as the new order of society, essentially the same behind the different façades of Stalinism, Nazism, Fascism, and the New Deal. [p1822]*

These points would be even more clear – in my personal opinion - if the term "bureaucratic collectivism" was substituted with corporations, corporatism and the corporate state. What is critical is that totalitarianism can (and does) arise in many environments, not only in communism or socialism, and it entails the use of managerial techniques to manipulate democracy. Those who fondly imagine that Britain or America (USA) are secure against totalitarianism while they avoid leadership from the Left are sadly - and intentionally -

misguided. The demand for effective democracy should unite Right and Left.

John Warner says

Read originally as the three volume political biography of Trotsky but after I lost my books in a house fire - I have replaced it with this single volume edition.

Steffi says

Well, this must be nothing less than THE definitive political biography. Isaac Deutscher, Polish Jewish Marxist (emigrated to the US), wrote this three-volume biography of LT between 1954 and 1969, so obviously a product of its time.

I am not even going to attempt to summarize the 1,600 pages aka the life of LT but will just share a few personal takeaways:

1. wtf, LT must be the greatest revolutionary leader in history. Not that I know too many in such detail, but seriously.
2. this dude really was a 'prophet'. the way he fully understood the historical significance of his time and personal involvement is beyond impressive.
3. I loved to follow his 'coming of ideas' from rejecting Marxism as a late teen, to 'hating on' Lenin and being a Menshevik of sorts pre-revolution to, well, joining Lenin and the party in mid-1917. Indeed, political beliefs aren't static, or shouldn't be, they need to develop and be refined through life long analysis and experience. Maybe that's the meaning of life. Kidding, there's none.
4. While Lenin and fellow émigré gang were busy arguing it out in Europe, LT pretty much took over the first Soviet in the failed revolution of 1905. Like, with no prior experience at age 26 or so. Depressing thought: What was I doing at 26? facebooking?
5. While there are so many more important historical details, it bugs me that LT and Rosa Luxemburg never really hit it off/ hooked up. Just imagine!
6. Confirms my suspicion: it is indeed and totally impossible to really befriend people with different political views, especially reformist social democrats :-)
7. Woman, high time to leave the third world and the comfy expat bubble to join the action. Asap.
8. There's this one scene on the evening after the Bolsheviks took over Petrograd on 24 October 1917 where Lenin and Trotsky lie on the floor at the Smolny, dead tired from not sleeping for days and, well, leading an insurrection, and are kind of realizing what the fuck just happened. Could someone please paint that for me?
9. Revolution and war: then and now, the imperialist powers will not accept a successful revolution, e.g., Brest Litovsk.
10. As an anti-militarist with very little interest in military literature, I always dreaded Trotsky's military writings. The 100-page or so civil war chapter in the book was an excellent enough summary of how Trotsky designed and built the Red Army from scratch. Again, I am in awe. Also: what grand idea am I going to implement when I am 40?

11. It's funny how Stalin shows up here and there throughout the book, always as the creepy dumbwit. If only they knew how cunning and crafty he really was and, you know, death squat and such.
12. The tricky bit: 1921, after seven years of wars and international boycott have reduced Russia's GDP to a third of what it was 1913 with industry and infrastructure destroyed, massive drought and famine - where to start building the grand socialist society. Economic policy trial and error on a massive scale.
13. I have a thing, aka intellectual and somewhat aesthetic interest, for one-party states so the 1921-1924 years were an interesting read re: how a revolutionary democratic mass party slowly degenerates into a bureaucratic dictatorship in which state and party are no longer separate. It's not like Lenin and Trotsky didn't realize but there were many structural forces at play, none of which really favoured freedom and socialism. Duh.
14. Lenin dies early in the second book at around page 700, it was a little hard to read the remaining 900 pages.
15. And then: the almost five-year inner-party Kremlin intrigue which reads more like a Tsarist royal succession court intrigue. Stalin, obviously, won in part, I guess, because he was the only one solely driven by power whereas Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin and co were driven and divided by ideas. Ugh, Ugh.
16. Nerd problem: understandably, I suppose, the entire book, as well as its protagonists, like to describe the historic processes pre and post October through endless, and rather detailed, parallels with the French Revolution of which I have, much to my chagrin, a superficial knowledge only. Every book generates another ten to-reads! This never ends!
17. Great thing about the book is that it provides fairly concise summaries of all of Trotsky's major works, including the work's genesis and reception.
18. Loved the third part in wandering exile 1929-1940. I mean: 'loved'. First, there's 1930s Stalin's 'social revolution' aka social engineering on an unprecedented scale, as a development practitioner, I am generally pretty 'fascinated' by the scale and madness of Stalin's industrialization and collectivization. Makes Ethiopia look very unambitious, like, not even trying. Then the Comintern's major fuck-up re: Hitler and fascism.
19. Love how LT is often being described as 'prickly'. I only ever heard this word when J. used it to describe me.
20. The last book, exile years (Turkey -> France -> Norway -> Mexico) are also the most private accounts, e.g., tricky relationship with his son Lyova and then losing 4/4 children: illness and death of daughter Nina, suicide of his eldest daughter Zina in Berlin, murder of Lyova in Paris, disappearance/execution of his son Sergei in Russia.
21. Now muchos excited about my trip to Mexico City this summer to see the Trotsky Museum (with my Pyongyang travel buddies aka the Mexican triumvirate and the American chopsticks girl - for ideological consistency). Also: Getting onto my Russian visa right now. Petrograd, I am coming, 100 years too late but still! Reading and travels form the greatest circle in life. Ever.
22. <3
23. Recommended summer read, obviously.

Jerry says

Gifted prophet of a false god.

The life and times of Russian writer, revolutionary leader and Marxist fanatic Leon Trotsky are the subject of this 3 volume, 1,600+ page biography 'The Prophet' authored by former Polish Communist, Isaac Deutscher.

This epic biography chronicles the life one of the most fascinating and tragically misguided leaders of the 20th century.

For the uninitiated, Trotsky was second only to Vladimir Lenin in the infamous October 1917 Russian Revolution, He was also an intrepid freelance author, propagandist and journalist of sorts in addition to his revolutionary work (Think half Che Guevara, half H. L. Mencken).

Deutscher's classic bio suffers early on from the author's unabashed admiration for his subject, whom he constantly strains to apologize for and whose motives he tirelessly attempts to explicate. To be sure, this bias is understandable. To describe Trotsky as articulate would be a mammoth understatement; his eloquent writing is blinding in its incisive, illustrative brilliance. It's easy to imagine Trotsky's rousing speeches energizing tired, cold & hungry Red army soldiers during the Russian civil war.

From his early days on his father's farm in modern day Ukraine to his ceaseless pamphleteering on behalf of workers, to his relentless rise in the RSDLP to the highest political body of the Soviet Union and concluding with his shocking assassination in the summer of 1940 in Mexico, Trotsky lived a remarkable life. His indomitable will as an irretrievable communist notwithstanding, Trotsky was a formidable intellectual and inspiring political leader. Trotsky was an essential figure in both the 1905 Russian Revolution and alongside Lenin, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The subsequent bloody civil war (1917-1922) found him as ruthless leader of the Red Army.

The outstanding first volume, *The Prophet Armed* (1879-1921) details Trotsky's upbringing, radical Marxism, imprisonment and exile by the Tsarist monarchy as well as his rise to the top Bolshevik leadership during and after a pyrrhic victory in the civil war.

The second volume, *The Prophet Unarmed* (1921-1929) is a detailed history of the Bolshevik party before and after the death of Lenin and its regression into eventual murderous dictatorship under Josef Stalin. It should be said that Deutscher takes great time and effort to explain the many internal Bolshevik factional disputes and economic debates and their respective outcomes in this volume. Trotsky's activities often take a backseat to these developments which invariably result in Stalin increasingly in control of the Bolshevik party and government apparatus in contrast to Trotsky's aloof, mostly hands-off efforts to check the growing menace. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky loses the internal struggle to succeed Lenin as leader of the Soviet state and is subsequently exiled from Russia altogether by Stalin.

The third and final volume, *The Prophet Outcast* (1929-1940) serves as a tragic final chapter detailing Trotsky's last years as an international exile and pariah, being driven out of one nation after another and finally ending up in Mexico where he meets his untimely end at the hands of an NKVD assassin.

These books were authored and published in the 1950's and 60's and reading this bio after Communism has been so utterly wiped out and discredited as a form of socioeconomic organization is interesting; Deutscher was still grappling with the future prospects with little foreknowledge that Marxism was doomed.

Of course, the 1917 revolution itself was more opportunism than 'working class' upheaval as Lenin and his Bolshevik cadres seized power against the backdrop of World War I with Russia being badly mauled by Germany and a weak, wobbly provisional government in charge of a sprawling peasant nation, the stage was set for an organized and armed force with a large propaganda circulation to push it over (and initially only the city of Petrograd at that).

While ultimately misguided in his own life's mission, Trotsky had an often uncanny ability to foresee the future. (I.e., substitutism, the destruction of Stalin's personality cult, etc.) He had the pulse of the situation in 1930's Germany during Hitler's rise to power predicting fascist conquest with near-complete accuracy.

A striking aspect of Trotsky's final exile from the Soviet Union was his steadfast refusal to admit that socialism in Russia had been a dismal failure. Such was the fanaticism of Trotsky that even with friends and comrades executed or imprisoned in labor camps, (himself banished to the remote Turkish island of Prinkipo) his own citizenship revoked, etc. he still held fast to the belief that the Soviet state should not fall, that the revolution not be allowed to fail, no matter how horrible it became. This near-religious faith in the "worker's state" even led him to defend Stalin's 1939 invasion of Finland as being in the best interests of the USSR. There is also the problematic and ironic revelation that much of Stalin's grim dictatorial methods were the direct result of his co-opting the initial suggestions of Trotsky(i.e. militarization of labor, central planning, state ownership of industry).

In the end, Trotsky's family was almost entirely decimated by the Soviet NKVD, his opposition movement

and the Fourth International reduced to a tiny, ineffectual Marxist sect and his home in Mexico converted to a prison meant to protect him from the deadly international reach of his great enemy Stalin. He held his head high amidst continual setbacks with pen in hand and his devoted wife at his side, steadfast in his devotion to the false god of Communism.

Richard Coorie says

A breathtakingly dense yet beautifully written work of biography. Although not without its flaws (completely skipping over the Red Terror, for example), I cannot give this remarkable trilogy any less than 5 stars.

Joseph Rasmussen says

It's hard to provide a review that will give justice to the extensive research that has been undertaken to produce the three books contained. However, the author offers a genuine and respectfully close view of Trotsky's life and character. It gives an opportunity to understand the family relations and personal ties of the man beyond his political significance, and The Prophet truly is a remarkable read.

The revolutionary instinct of Trotsky is an inspiration and worthy reading for anyone considering to do so.

Mark Dickman says

The book that began my education as a Marxist. Deutscher's masterpiece and the definitive biography of Trotsky.

Baard Hansen says

Excellent biography of the greatest revolutionary in our time.
