

# Trotsky's Notable Publications

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## *Our Political Tasks (1904)*

- Trotsky wrote this pamphlet following the RSDLP's Second Congress in which the Party split into Menshevik and Bolshevik factions.
- Trotsky wrote it as a response to Lenin's pamphlet *One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back* (1904) in which he perceived the RSDLP split as a division between the revolutionary Bolsheviks and the opportunistic Mensheviks.
- In *On Political Tasks* Trotsky made strident criticisms of Lenin's conception of a tightly organised party of professional, intellectual revolutionaries that would stage the revolution on the proletariat's behalf. The workers, argued Trotsky, had a revolutionary capacity and should, indeed, be at the vanguard of forcing reform in Russia.
- Trotsky predicted that Lenin's centralised style of party organisation might lead to something he called 'substitutionism' that would lead to a dictatorship.

The internal politics of the Party these methods lead, as we shall see below, to the Party organisation "substituting" itself for the Party, the Central Committee substituting itself for the Party organisation, and finally the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee; on the other hand, this leads the committees to supply an "orientation" – and to change it – while "the people keep silent"; in "external" politics these methods are manifested in attempts to bring pressure to bear on other social organisations, by using the abstract strength of the class interests of the proletariat, and not the real strength of the proletariat conscious of its class interests. These "methods," as adopted by us and the content of our Party work. All in all, *these "methods" lead to the complete disappearance of questions of political tactics in Social Democracy.* (Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks*, 1904).

- The pamphlet is significant because it:
  - Demonstrates Trotsky's individualism and his willingness to engage others in vigorous debate; the essay strained his relationship with Lenin.

- In the post-1917 era Trotsky's political enemies used *Our Political Tasks* to accuse him of being a Menshevik. His attacks on Lenin and the Party's organisation in 1904 undermined his standing in the Bolshevik Party in later years.
- Robert Service describes *Our Political Tasks* as a 'brilliant exposition' that was 'prophetic in many basic respects' (Service, *Trotsky: a biography*, p. 82): after seizing power in 1917 the Bolshevik regime governed in an increasingly centralised and dictatorial manner, with the workers, by and large, playing little role in determining the direction of the revolution.

### ***Results and Prospects (1906)***

- Trotsky wrote this pamphlet while incarcerated in the Peter and Paul fortress in St Petersburg following his arrest for involvement in the St Petersburg Soviet during the 1905 revolution.
- In *Results and Prospects* Trotsky analysed the events of 1905 and considered what significance they had for an interpretation of Marxism for a Russian context. How, he considered, could classical Marxism be modified and applied to Russia's rather unique political and economic circumstances, in light of what had transpired during 1905?
- Trotsky himself considered *Results and Prospects* his clearest exposition of the concept of 'permanent revolution' before 1917. This argued that a revolution in Russia was not an isolated event but part of a global revolution. Indeed, although capable of overthrowing the tsarist regime, a revolutionary government would then face counter-revolution from Russia's middle and peasant classes, and Western capitalist nations, as it attempted to nationalise the economy. The only way a Russian worker revolution could survive was if it was followed by similar revolutions in neighbouring countries.

Left to its own resources, the working class of Russia will inevitably be crushed by the counter-revolution the moment the peasantry turns its back on it. It will have no alternative but to link the fate of its political rule, and, hence, the fate of the whole Russian revolution, with the fate of the socialist revolution in Europe. That colossal state-political power given it by a temporary conjuncture of circumstances in the Russian

bourgeois revolution it will cast into the scales of the class struggle of the entire capitalist world. With state power in its hands, with counter-revolution behind it and European reaction in front of it, it will send forth to its comrades the world over the old rallying cry, which this time will be a call for the last attack: *Workers of all countries, unite!* (Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*, 1906).

- Another important aspect of *Results and Prospects* are Trotsky's comments about the peasants. He predicted that, which the peasantry would initially join with the proletariat in seizing power, that they would afterwards come into conflict with the workers. He wrote:

The proletariat will find itself compelled to carry the class struggle into the villages and in this manner destroy that community of interest which is undoubtedly to be found among all peasants, although within comparatively narrow limits... The primitiveness of the peasantry turns its hostile face towards the proletariat. (Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*, 1906).

- This publication is significant because:
  - Geoffrey Swain describes it as “a piece of writing which outlined the views that guided him [Trotsky] for the rest of his life... it was, in essence a credo for life which never changed”. [Swain, *Trotsky and the Russian Revolution*, pp. 22-23].
  - Offered a theoretical solution to applying classical Marxism to Russia's circumstances (limited industrialisation, small working class) and proposed a means by which Russian Marxists might stage a revolution in the near future, before Russia had fully industrialised.
  - It is also a clear exposition of his ideological contrast with the Mensheviks. Whereas they believed that Russia first needed to go through a liberal revolution and a lengthy period of capitalism, Trotsky argued for more immediate and less narrowly focused revolutionary action.
  - The theory of permanent revolution, articulated here, became a principal aspect of Trotskyist Marxism and a point of dispute between Trotsky and Stalin in the 1920s.
  - At the same time, Trotsky's anticipated use of force against the peasantry (which he demonstrated during the Civil War) was broadly similar to Stalin's

oppressive approach to the peasants in the 1930s. Was Trotsky's vision for the USSR likely to lead to a similar war against the peasants as the one Stalin waged in the early 1930s during the collectivisation of agriculture?

### ***Terrorism and Communism (1920)***

- During the Civil War the German socialist leader Karl Kautsky wrote a piece that criticised the Bolsheviks for the violent and repressive measures they had used to impose their government on Russia. Trotsky wrote *Terrorism and Communism* in response to Kautsky.
- In this essay Trotsky aggressively defends and justifies the Bolsheviks' use of violence and terror against what he characterises as the revolution's class enemies. He refers to the precedent of the French revolution to demonstrate how those revolutionaries needed to use violence to defend their regime from counter-revolution and argues that the counter-revolutionary forces of Russia cannot be intimidated into accepting the new regime without violence. In any case, he sees revolutionary violence as inevitable:

A revolutionary class which has conquered power with arms in its hands is bound to, and will, suppress, rifle in hand, all attempts to tear the power out of its hands. Where it has against it a hostile army, it will oppose to it its own army. Where it is confronted with armed conspiracy, attempt at murder, or rising, it will hurl at the heads of its enemies an unsparing penalty...

Intimidation is a powerful weapon of policy, both internationally and internally. War, like revolution, is founded upon intimidation. A victorious war, generally speaking, destroys only an insignificant part of the conquered army, intimidating the remainder and breaking their will. The revolution works in the same way: it kills individuals, and intimidates thousands. In this sense, the Red Terror is not distinguishable from the armed insurrection, the direct continuation of which it represents. The State terror of a revolutionary class can be condemned "morally" only by a man who, as a principle, rejects (in words) every form of violence whatsoever – consequently, every war and every rising. (Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 1920).

- Trotsky also justifies other repressive measures such as the Bolshevik censorship of the press, characterising it again in terms of class warfare, the press being another instrument of counter-revolution:

We are fighting. We are fighting a life-and-death struggle. The Press is a weapon not of an abstract society, but of two irreconcilable, armed and contending sides. We are destroying the Press of the counter-revolution, just as we destroyed its fortified positions, its stores, its communication, and its intelligence system. Are we depriving ourselves of Cadet and Menshevik criticisms of the corruption of the working class? In return we are victoriously destroying the very foundations of capitalist corruption. (Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 1920).

This publication is significant because:

- In it Trotsky explicitly acknowledges his view that revolutionary violence is necessary and that, indeed, that when employing it the ends justify the means. By this logic it might be argued that for Trotsky (and the regime he was helping establish) there were no limits to the scale of repressive and extrajudicial violence that could be employed in the name of the revolution.
- It could be argued that there is, broadly, a continuity between the ideas in *Terrorism and Communism* and Trotsky's anticipation of a conflict between the revolutionary proletariat and the peasantry in *Results and Prospects*. For Trotsky, revolution was inherently a form of class war that would need to be waged by one class to wrest the means of production of another and to then to defend the regime from counter-revolutionary elements. These were not just words for Trotsky: he employed violence in the Civil War and, notably, against the Kronstadt garrison in 1921.
- *Terrorism and Communism* may be used as evidence that Trotsky was instrumental, alongside Lenin, Stalin and other Politburo members, in orchestrating a regime and political system that, from its very outset, was oppressive and violent in nature. It could also be used to argue that Trotsky did not represent a more moderate alternative to Stalin: had he won the power struggle Trotsky would have likely, given what he wrote in 1920 and his actions then, used force as a form of coercion.

***The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going (1936)***

- Trotsky wrote this book during a tumultuous period of his life. Having been exiled from the USSR and then forced to move around Europe he managed to secure entry into Norway in 1935 - there he wrote *The Revolution Betrayed* in 1935-36.
- In the book Trotsky makes an assessment of the Soviet Union and its leadership. He covers a range of topic including the USSR's economic and political systems, its foreign policy and everyday life in the USSR. **Broadly, he is highly critical of Stalin and the centralised, undemocratic government that has developed. He argues that Stalin's assumption of control of the party saw the USSR break from Bolshevism and 'betray' the course towards socialism on which the revolution had put Russia.**
  - He argues that Soviet economic policy had been inconsistent and chaotic- a result of a lack of democracy in the development of Party policy. He argues that Stalin's approach to collectivisation had led the nation to "the brink of disaster".
  - Trotsky analysed the concept of the Soviet bureaucracy, characterising them as not a new class in their own right but, rather, a section of the working class alienated from its class roots, influenced both by the bureaucracy left over from the Tsarist era and the de-politicisation of the working class. They were, he claimed, a symptom of 'thermidor' a term from the French revolution pointing to a stagnation of the revolution. Likewise, he characterised Stalin as a Napoleon Bonaparte-like figure who had simply replaced the tsars and now behaved like one.
  - Trotsky argued that a lack of democracy would compromise the USSR's economic development.
  - He noted the return to conservative family values as another example of 'thermidor' - revolutionary stagnation.
- Nonetheless, Trotsky was adamant that the revolution had been successful in transforming Russia; he was completely unapologetic about the imposition of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or the repressive measures undertaken against 'class enemies':

Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of **Das Kapital**, but in an industrial arena comprising a sixth part of the earth's surface – not in the language of dialectics, but in the language of steel, cement and electricity. Even if the

Soviet Union, as a result of internal difficulties, external blows and the mistakes of leadership, were to collapse – which we firmly hope will not happen – there would remain an earnest of the future this indestructible fact, that thanks solely to a proletarian revolution a backward country has achieved in less than 10 years successes unexampled in history. (Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, 1936).

This publication is significant because:

- It is an early, authoritative and influential critique of the Stalinist system which, in its 1936 constitution claimed to have abolished the exploitation of one class over another inherent in capitalist systems. Trotsky's criticisms also came at a time when the USSR was reaching out, diplomatically and economically, to other nations - it could, or perhaps should, have informed policymakers in these countries about their decision to cooperate with Stalin's regime.
- In it Trotsky makes some observations and analyses of the USSR that might be considered prescient and which have stood up to the test of modern scholarship, based on Soviet archives opened post-Cold War.
- Nevertheless, it demonstrates Trotsky's continued, unwavering, commitment to the Bolshevik cause and his continued faith in the revolutionary process: he simply saw the current stagnation as a phase on the road to communism. He failed to recognise that his own advocacy of terrorism, state centralisation, censorship and a war against the peasantry were essential elements of Stalinism, perhaps undermining his authority as a critic of the regime. He also remained unapologetic about the events of 1917-24, seeing them, rather, as an essential and triumphant overthrow of capitalism and the remarkably rapid transformation of the Soviet economy. As Ian Thatcher writes: Some of [*The Revolution Betrayed's*] fundamental propositions were questioned. The most severe attacks focused on its most basic premise that there was a pristine period in the revolution's history, under Lenin's command. Some object that Lenin was as guilty as Stalin of extinguishing democracy and establishing the rule of a bureaucratic elite... There could hardly be a betrayal of the revolution, as Trotsky was suggesting, if Stalin's rule did not differ from that of Lenin.

[Ian D. Thatcher, *Trotsky*, p. 195]