

The organiser of victory

By Max Shachtman

KARL Radek called the man who directed the work of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and became the first leader of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, the "sword of the revolution", the "organiser of the victory". A few years later, Trotsky described his arch-opponent, Stalin, as the "great organiser of defeat".

One year ago, Trotsky was murdered in lonely exile and when he died those who acknowledged him as their leader numbered only a few thousand men and women throughout the entire world. His assassin in the Kremlin seemed at the height of his power, with more authority concentrated in his hands than anyone in history had ever known, unchallenged at home and wooed simultaneously by the two big aggregations of powers contending for the mastery of the world.

That was a year ago. Yet, as the shadows of history lengthen, they will throw into higher relief a permanent judgement of the two men; Trotsky will be recorded as the great organiser of victory and Stalin as the great organiser of defeat.

People with limited horizons, who boastfully call themselves "practical", find it difficult to understand this contrast in the roles of Trotsky, on the one hand, and Stalin, or other contemporary political figures, on the other. They judge by the fleeting and deceptive successes of a single day or a month. A clever ruse makes a bigger impression on them than a hard-fought battle, and victory or defeat in a battle means more than victory or defeat in a long, drawn-out war.

His greatness as a revolutionist

TROTSKY'S greatness as a revolutionist, as a reorganiser of society, lay in his patience. He liked to point out the multitude of examples of impatience leading to wild adventures in politics or to short-sighted opportunism: and of both leading to dreadful calamities. He could never be persuaded to abandon the fundamental principles which were his life's work in order to achieve even a temporary victory, for he knew that victories bought at that price soon turned bitter and ate away the fibre of the victor himself. That is how he was able to regard Stalin, with all his "successes", as the organiser of defeat, and to consider himself, with true historical impersonalness, or more accurately to consider his political philosophy as the organiser of victory.

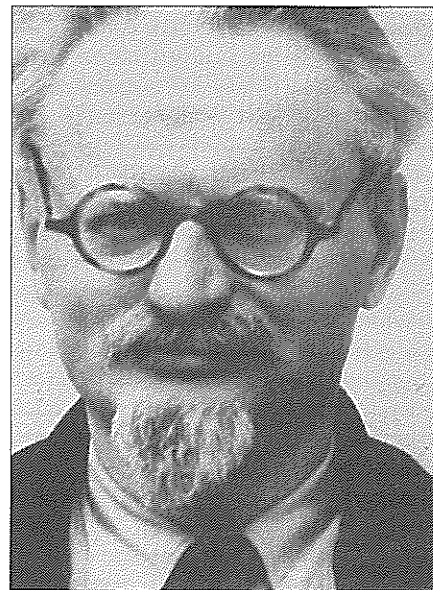
More than one example from the record of his struggle illustrates his method and his viewpoint. Surely everyone has heard of the armchair strategists who like to point out the "errors" and "shortcomings" in Trotsky's fight against Stalinist degeneration. That there was more than one goes without saying, and like every serious political person there is no doubt that Trotsky, too, would have done many things differently if he had had the chance to re-enact his life. But, oddly enough, the arrows of the dilettante and philistine critics usually hit wide of the mark and are almost always aimed at those spots in Trotsky's armour where he is invulnerable.

How many times have we heard, for instance, that in 1923, when Trotsky was still at the head of the Red Army, "he should have taken a couple of regiments into the Kremlin and cleared out the Stalinist gang at one blow"? "Oh, they are very clever, these people, very clever", Trotsky used to tell me, his eyebrows lifting sardonically with his voice. "All they lack is the capacity to think, that is all. The Opposition was fighting for revolutionary policy and workers' democracy, for the self-activity of the masses, in order effectively to combat the threat of Thermidorean degeneration and Bonapartist dictatorship. And how would these gentlemen have accomplished this? By organising, behind the backs of the Party and the masses, a Bonapartist military conspiracy and coup! Then, instead of a gradual process leading to Stalinist Bonapartism, we would have had an instantaneous Trotskyist Bonapartism. Yes, they are very clever people."

Reaction reinforces bureaucracy

HE particularly enjoyed his elaborately sarcastic ridiculing of similar criticisms of the course of the Trotskyist Opposition made by journalistic observers of uniform superficiality. They would repeat time and again that Trotsky blundered fatally by confining his fight against the bureaucratic hierarchy to the ranks of the Bolshevik Party instead of appealing to the wide masses of the population, "where his name was still magic." Others pretend to see in Trotsky's policy an illustration of Bolshevism's "anti-democratic disdain for the masses."

"They do not understand anything at all," Trotsky would say. "The struggle started when the whole country was being swept by moods of reaction. With these reactionary



moods, the reactionary bureaucracy grew and its boldness and disloyalty increased. The only force capable of resisting these moods among the masses, and transforming them, was the Bolshevik Party, the revolutionary vanguard, with all its deficiencies and deformities. For the Opposition to appeal to the masses then would have meant to mobilise the increasingly conservative masses against the still revolutionary vanguard. The Opposition could not do that without betraying and destroying itself on the spot. The bureaucracy could make such an appeal. In fact, it had to make such an appeal. You know that it threw open the Party in its spurious 'Lenin levy' to a tremendous influx of hundreds of thousands of raw, untrained people, who constituted thereafter the big voting blocs of the bureaucracy. The Party was diluted and finally disintegrated by the Bonapartists by precisely this method. Only when the Party was finally dissolved and replaced by a repressive bureaucratic apparatus did the Opposition have to turn to the advanced elements among the masses for the re-formation of a party, a revolutionary vanguard against the pseudo-party, that is, against the Stalinist apparatus. Naturally, our critics do not understand this development. In general, they understand nothing."

Optimism based on realism

TROTSKY'S patience of course had nothing in common with passivity or timidity. It was based on that unquenchable optimism that

struck everyone who came in contact with his writings or his person. His optimism, in turn, was based on the boldest, most perspicacious and realistic analyses of the course of development of history known since the days of Karl Marx.

Of all the revolutionists in Europe, Russia included, at the turn of the century, he alone foresaw and predicted with perfectly amazing accuracy the socialist course of the coming revolution against Czarism. Indifferent to all the charges of "utopianism" by the "practical" and "realistic" people, he worked out the dynamics of the future Russian revolution a dozen years before it actually took place. He showed why there was no class in semi-feudal, autocratic Russia that could lead and carry out a revolution except the proletariat. That, no matter under what conditions the revolution began, the working class could not, once launched on its struggle, ascetically impose upon itself such self-restraint as would keep the revolution within the limits of capitalist democracy. That, in the very course of carrying on the democratic revolution, it would find itself compelled, in alliance with the peasant masses, to make such encroachments upon the institutions of capitalist property as would direct it inexorably toward proletarian, socialist rule. The revolution, unless suppressed by counter-revolution, would have to proceed uninterruptedly; it would be a revolution in permanence.

It is instructive to read all the old socialist polemics against Trotsky before 1917. All the "practical" and "realistic" opponents of Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution read now as if they lived in the clouds. Even Lenin failed to grasp fully the clairvoyant forcefulness of Trotsky's analysis, although on some of the concrete aspects of the development of the revolution he displayed a keener insight into what was ahead than did Trotsky himself. Trotsky waited, patient but unceasingly active, throughout the years of bitter reaction that followed the 1905 uprising in Russia; waited patiently through the bleak years of the World War; waited — perhaps less patiently this time! — through the brief months of the democratic utopian, Kerensky; only to be vindicated to the hilt by the triumphant Bolshevik revolution of 1917-1918.

His theories vindicated

THE vindication of the theory of permanent revolution, Trotsky's unique and magnificent contribution to the arsenal of Marxism, was not, unfortunately, confined to the victory of 1917. If he was vindicated once by success, he was also vindicated once by defeat.

The victorious revolution in Russia, he wrote in 1915, and even earlier, will not

succeed in maintaining itself if it remains in isolation, if it is not followed by socialist revolutions in the more advanced countries of Europe. This aspect of the theory of the permanent revolution was inseparable, in Trotsky's mind, from the one set forth above.

Taking direct issue with this view, Stalin developed the theory of "socialism in one country", that is, the theory that Russia could establish a socialist society regardless of what happened to the rest of the world.

It is not so much between these two men that the violent conflict developed, as between these two fundamental conceptions. One was the realistic theory of revolutionary working class internationalism. The other, the utopian theory of a reactionary, nationalistic bureaucracy. Stalin succeeded in destroying the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International, in crushing the revolution in a dozen countries all over the globe, in wiping out the Soviets and democracy in the Soviet Union, in slaughtering, imprisoning and enslaving the people of the country, and in plunging an axe into the brain of Trotsky. His theory "won". Only, he did not "build socialism in one country", for what he has established in the Soviet Union is not even a recognisable caricature of socialism or the rule of the working class. And, we are convinced, when history has had its last word it will have been shown that the Stalinist bureaucracy did not succeed in solidifying even its own rule "in one country". The great organiser of defeat, so admired by philistines and muttonheads for his "practicalness" and his precarious triumphs, will end in the successful organisation of the thoroughgoing defeat of himself and his murderous clique.

His view on the Russian situation

TO THIS last day, Trotsky had only the serene convictions about the eventual outcome of the struggle between the proletariat and the Stalinist bureaucracy, as he had about the outcome of the struggle between the world proletariat and world imperialism. His concern revolved only around the dilemma: will this perfidious bureaucracy be destroyed by the revolutionary proletariat, which would thereby give a new and decisive impetus to the victory of international socialism, or will it succumb, together with the Soviet Union as a whole, to the blow of imperialist reaction, which would thereby set the inevitable proletarian revolution back for years and perhaps decades?

This concern disturbed him when the Second World War broke out even more than he had been disturbed in 1932 and 1933, when he feared that his clarion voice summoning the German proletariat to a

united front of struggle against Hitlerism would not be heeded. Not because, as some stupid people think, he was a "Russian patriot", or because his attachment to the Soviet Union was "personal" and "sentimental", but precisely because he remained to his dying hour what he had always been throughout his conscious life, an incorruptible old soldier of the international socialist revolution.

Only from the standpoint of the interests of that revolution did he continue to hold steadfastly to the slogan of "unconditional defence of the Soviet Union against imperialist attack". Because the war had taken forms none of us had anticipated, and Russia's role in the war was reactionary, we, who had learned our Marxism from Trotsky and his forebears, found it impossible to follow him in this course. Trotsky was uncompromising on matters he regarded as of principled importance, and there ensued between us a sharp polemic, that field in which among so many others he was a master. The breach that formed between us was widened unnecessarily by the vulgarisations of his supporters in [the USA] and by their bureaucratic procedure, and it was not bridged while he lived.

Not with mummery...

EVEN so, we bow our flag at the still fresh grave of our greatest teacher, the most stalwart proletarian revolutionist of our time. Even so, despite our differences, we remain what we were, Trotskyists, partisans of the programme and principles of revolutionary Marxian internationalism, of the permanent revolution, of the Fourth International.

Trotsky was revolted by the hideous mummery of the Stalinists who embalmed the corpse of Lenin only the more easily to betray his principles and traduce his memory, as Lenin before him had been infuriated at the canonisation of Marx by the social democrats who betrayed Marxism. Nothing could be more remote from the life and teachings and deeds of Trotsky than to convert him into a religious image to be borne at the head of processions or worshipped in a niche. The generation of revolutionists to whom we belong have titanic tasks before them. They can be fulfilled only by assimilating into the blood stream the fundamental principles of Marxism which Trotsky defended so brilliantly and so brilliantly enriched, by infusing the working class movement with the spirit of hatred for all oppression, of militancy, of single-minded devotion, of courage, of boundless conviction in the triumph of socialism which animated Leon Trotsky throughout his life.

● The article was published by *Labour Action*, the weekly paper of the Workers' Party (USA) in August 1941.