



Marilyn Vogt-Downey, ed. *The Ideological Legacy of L. D. Trotsky: History and Contemporary Times*. New York, N.Y.: Committee for the Study of Leon Trotsky's Legacy, 1998.

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Trotsky Lives!(!?)

The articles in this collection originally were presented at the first conference in Russia dedicated to Trotsky, which was held in 1994. Proclaimed an "International Scientific Conference," the meeting did in fact include speakers from Russia, Ukraine, Great Britain, France, and the United States. However, the designation "scientific" is open to question, because the main thrust of the meeting and the present volume appears to give precedence to the advancement of Trotskyism over the scholarly consideration of Trotsky's legacy. As I assume that H-Russia subscribers are more likely to be scholars interested in Trotsky rather than converts to Trotskyism, I will orient my comments accordingly.

The professional scholar will find in this collection far too many emphatic assertions that ought to be addressed as questions for further study. For example, that Trotsky's ideological legacy is to this day "enormous" (pp. v, 3) is a fundamental assumption for most authors. From this starting point, the most common approach of the book's contributors is to select key points from Soviet history and the post-Soviet period which can be shown to have been understood or anticipated to some degree by Trotsky. So far so good. Most specialists would agree that Trotsky had valuable insights into the nature of Stalinism, but does this amount to an enormous impact? It must be asked, have any important current events been influenced by Trotsky's ideological legacy?

Several of the authors approach this question by asserting the enduring significance of the Russian Revolu-

tion, in which Trotsky's role undoubtedly was great. Many of us who study the USSR as a calling, and as part of making a living, would agree that the revolution was one of the most important events of the century. But perhaps the time has come when even that assessment ought not be taken for granted. Maybe now we all need to reconsider the revolution and its impact. Just what has endured? For several of the authors represented in this volume the most important legacy of the revolution seem to be merely the remnants of "collectivized property" (pp. 65, 161), which abstractly appear to provide an economic basis for a proletarian political movement.

Such a movement, headed by a Trotskyist vanguard, is evidently the aim of many of the contributors to this volume. Yet this reviewer at least cannot accept that Trotskyism is likely to attract many workers in the former Soviet republics today. Consider, for example, the analysis offered by Savas Michael-Matsas:

The key question is undoubtedly the transformation of the working class into a class for itself. This means the overcoming both of the effects of atomization and the new illusions produced by the massive introduction of commodity-money relations as well as the effects of the Stalinist legacy itself. The continuity and revival of October are impossible without the lessons of history, without overcoming the ideological and material blunders of Stalinism, without developing a new program for a socialist way out from the crisis, without a new Marxist leadership. (p. 45)

How do we know that the workers would prefer a revival of October over the new commodity illusions, if the latter include the consumer goods that keep people slaving away in developed countries? Many of the authors included in the present volume offer “lessons of history” in the form of a catechism covering such topics as “permanent revolution,” “Stalinist falsification,” and “bureaucratic degeneration.” The problem with this is not that it is all wrong—again, the present reviewer agrees with much of it. The problem is that the same points are repeated over and over, while other vitally important topics are left out entirely. That is what makes the prevalent approach in this volume too crudely ideological to appeal to professional scholars. At the same time, one wonders just what in all this would appeal to workers today. Why should Ukrainian coal miners today care about Trotsky’s position on Soviet foreign trade in the late twenties (p. 92)?

In fairness, it must be noted that not all the contributors to the volume agree with each other, nor do they all refrain from criticizing Trotsky himself. Hillel Ticktin considers Trotsky’s thinking about the USSR to have been “relatively limited” (p. 106) and “internally inconsistent” (p. 112), yet nevertheless valuable as a “crucial basis for analysis of Stalinism” (p. 113) of the sort Ticktin himself has produced concerning the control of labor in the USSR. A. V. Gusev clarifies the position of the Trotskyist opposition with respect to accelerated industrialization, defending Trotsky against the charge that he advocated “superindustrialization” (p. 81), but goes on to note that Trotsky remained a “captive of dogmas” (p. 98). Editor Vogt-Downey occasionally includes footnotes that register disagreements with some of the writers. For instance, she takes exception to Gusev’s conclusion that Trotsky’s advocacy of democracy referred only to the party, not soviets, unions, and other institutions (p. 88). M. I. Voyeikov’s view that Trotsky’s theory of “permanent revolution” was a compromise between Bolshevik and Menshevik positions provokes another editorial response (p. 8).

If the honing of such fine points holds interest for some readers, M.N. Gretskey’s “Trotsky’s Polemic with Bruno Rizzi” (pp. 126-33) may be rewarding. How-

ever, there will be few readers with sufficient stamina to follow Chris Edwards as he distinguishes “neo-Shachtmanite, bureaucratic collectivists” from “quasi-Shachtmanites,” only to lump them all together as “neo/quasi-Shachtmanites” (p. 162). Later, the “neo-Shachtmanites” drop out of the analysis, but the “quasi-Shachtmanites” are castigated for “applauding” the reunification of Germany, which made them “guilty of ceding to Kohl and the East German capitalist counterrevolution the overthrow of the East German Stalinists which was the task of Trotskyists on the basis of the defense and westward extension of the collectivized property” (p. 164).

However, most articles in this collection are connected to reality to some extent. Their most common shortcoming is a lack of scholarly underpinning. For example, N. S. Shukhov’s “On Trotsky’s Economic Platform” (pp. 69-73) includes no mention of Richard B. Day’s work. A. M. Yeryomin complains of “insufficient attention to his [Trotsky’s] economic activity” (p. 75) and also fails to mention Day or Alec Nove. Simon Pirani acknowledges that his interesting essay, “Trotsky and the Revolutions in China and Vietnam” (pp. 151-56), was not based on academic research, but he does provide sources for further reading.

In my view, the Moscow conference’s main achievement was the founding of the “Committee for the Study of Leon Trotsky’s Legacy,” which has since worked to publish and distribute the works of Trotsky in Russia. The fact that such a conference could be held in Russia, where Trotsky once was Judas Iscariot and Lucifer rolled into one, is also noteworthy. Most contributors to this volume appear to hope that such new freedoms will be useful for their cause, but I would argue that they are inherently good in and of themselves. In that spirit, I am glad that such a work as this could appear in Russia and the United States. However, the actual contents of the volume are likely to interest very few readers in either country.

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