

## Lev Trotskii's Experiences of Autobiography: *My Life* and Its Antecedents

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Lev Trotskii's contradictory legacy as a revolutionary politician has become a subject of debate among his biographers. On the one hand, Trotskii is regarded as a model revolutionary and radical Bolshevik whose image became iconic during the "heroic" period of the 1917 Revolution. He was responsible for the military triumph in the Civil War, as well as for the formation of the new Soviet state, although he needs to be considered within the context of the atrocities that took place during those periods. On the other hand, Trotskii was an implacable enemy of Stalin, who denounced the entire Stalinist political system as counterrevolutionary and totalitarian, and so he also needs to be considered as an outsider to that very system. In both cases, Trotskii is a symbolic and mythologized figure.

Although his legacy is most strongly attached to his role as a revolutionary, Trotskii is also famous—one can even say popular—as an intellectual and a writer outside the framework of politics. In his written legacy his autobiography, *My Life*, occupies a particularly privileged place.<sup>1</sup> First published in 1929 and soon translated into a wide variety of languages, *My Life* has enjoyed significant general interest from readers, as well as considerable criticism from opponents. The first and foremost reason for this attention is the book's uniqueness *per se* as the memoirs of a top Soviet leader-turned-oppositionist. In other words, his role as a political figure stoked interest in his writing. Even the subtitle for the English translation was very telling: *The Rise and Fall of a Dictator*.<sup>2</sup> Even more important is how his work has retained its popularity as a result of the author's candid manner of accounting for the many episodes of his life, in conjunction with his indisputably brilliant writing style. These

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<sup>1</sup> Lev Trotskii, *Moia zhizn': Opyt avtobiografii* (Berlin: Granit, 1930).

<sup>2</sup> Leon Trotskii, *My Life: The Rise and Fall of a Dictator* (London: Thornton & Butterworth, 1930).

features won a place for *My Life* in the cultural legacy of modernity and cemented it as a remarkable historical source.

Wolfgang and Petra Lubitz, in their latest and the most authoritative bibliographical research on *My Life*, point to a loose consensus among Trotskii's various biographers on the importance of this source.<sup>3</sup> The best works in the vast historiography of "Trotskyana" deal with *My Life*, including the third volume of Isaac Deutscher's biographical trilogy, the more analytical attempt to approach Trotskii's "theory" by Baruch Knei-Paz, or Philip Pomper's turn to the revolutionary's autobiographical narrative in order to reconstruct his "psychology."<sup>4</sup> Kirsty McCluskey and Robert Service provide a more detailed picture of Trotskii's autobiographical writing through a comparison of his drafts, incorporating material from émigré and declassified Soviet archives.<sup>5</sup> But these historians rarely go beyond a narrow range of questions regarding the autobiography's conformity to the facts.<sup>6</sup> They are more interested in how the document reflects on Trotskii's political career and are less concerned with how *My Life* functions as a reflection on Trotskii in other realms.

These and other contributors notwithstanding, *My Life* deserves to be systematically and thoroughly explored, and the aims of this chapter are similar, in some ways, to the existing historiography, as it aims to address Trotskii's autobiographical engagement with the Russian Revolution in the broader context of his writings. However, *My Life* is more than a reflection of its author's political activity. *My Life* appeared as a juncture point of Trotskii's lifespan, both in terms of experiencing autobiography and experiencing life itself.

Somewhat provocatively, I intend to reread this explicitly politicized autobiography through less political optics, in order to indicate which meanings, arguably, were important for the author. Approaching an analysis of *My Life*, one should emphasize its subtitle, *Opyt avtobiografii*, which was originally translated into English somewhat misleadingly as *An Attempt at an Autobiography*. This formulation is not coincidental; on the contrary, it is crucial

<sup>3</sup> Petra Lubitz and Wolfgang Lubitz, "'Mein Leben'—'Моя Жизнь': Ein Essay über Trockijs Autobiographie und den jungen Trockij (1879–1904)," *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet* (2019), 45–48, [https://www.trotskyana.net/Leon\\_Trotsky/Autobiography/autobiography\\_essay.pdf](https://www.trotskyana.net/Leon_Trotsky/Autobiography/autobiography_essay.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 221–30; Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 513–21; Philip Pomper, *Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin: The Intelligentsia and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Kirsty McCluskey, "Reading Trotsky, Writing Bronstein: Assessing the Story of Lev Trotsky's Childhood and Youth, 1879–1902," *Revolutionary Russia* 19, 1 (2006): 1–20; Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Gary Kern, "Trotsky's Autobiography," *The Russian Review* 36, 3 (1977): 297–319; Geoffrey Swain, "Silences in Trotskii's *My Life*," *Avtobiografija*, no. 6 (2017): 15–33.

for understanding the place of autobiographical writing in Trotskii's way of thinking and writing. Moreover, *My Life* appears as one of the turning points and central nodes in Trotskii's auto- and biographical narratives, which reveal continuity and comprehensiveness through their multiple evolutions. Although it was not revised in his later years, *My Life* should be read in this broad context of Trotskii's writings. Thus, the first section outlines the variety of Trotskii's attempts at an autobiography with a special focus on their background and preconditions. In the case of *My Life*, the aim of this chapter is, broadly speaking, to map out both its main controversies, but also to stress some marginal issues of rather individual nature.

### Attempts at Autobiography

Trotskii started to write in different genres as a teenager. From the time of his first Siberian exile in 1900–02, he was a highly productive publicist. Trotskii's very first autobiographical text, *Tuda i obratno* (known in English as "My Round Trip," although a more literal translation would be "There and Back"), was written shortly after he escaped from his second Siberian exile in 1907.<sup>7</sup> It was published in by the legal modernist publishing house *Shipovnik*, which paid Trotskii an honorarium large enough to fund his emigration from Finland to Western Europe. Compared to *My Life*, his first autobiographical work was not only short, but also more traditional; it contained the story of a trip to Siberia (based on letters to his wife), and, shortly after a stop on the route, an adventurous escape. This little book attracted interest due to Trotskii's ethnographical observations of the everyday life of the tundra's indigenous people. Unsurprisingly, in this early text Trotskii combined a number of elements: first-person speech, a rhetorical tribute to the revolutionary cause, and attention to details. *Tuda i obratno* became an important work for Trotskii personally, as shown by his decision to republish it in 1919. He also drew on it heavily for one of the chapters of *My Life*.

While living in Europe from 1908 to 1912, Trotskii published regularly in the newspaper *Pravda*, advocating a centrist line in the divided Social Democratic movement. Because of his need to earn a living, he had to also work in the "bourgeois" (nonsocialist) press, and in doing so he became a professional journalist. He was especially a master of writing pamphlets. Many other Marxists of the time were active journalists who depended on their journalism for survival. Trotskii differed from many of them by writing for the nonsocialist press as a correspondent for the liberal newspaper *Kiev-skaia mysl'* (Kievan Thought), for which he served as a special reporter during

<sup>7</sup> Lev Trotskii, *Tuda i obratno* (St. Petersburg: Shipovnik, 1907).

the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. Trotskii addressed the ordinary reader's taste by writing about famous contemporaries, and some of his articles were based on personal recollections. During the Balkan Wars, Trotskii was reluctant to write anything specifically autobiographical. Only during periods of temporary inactivity, such as his time in Zurich at the beginning of World War I, or as the result of arrest by French and then Spanish police in 1916, did he turn to writing a diary.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, no later than 1918 he published some of his writings from the period of 1914–16 in English under the title *Chapters from My Diary*.<sup>9</sup> It was, however, a diary in a typical journalist's meaning of the word, as the diary as such was not Trotskii's favorite genre; he preferred to write for the public.

The 1917 Revolution was the most intense period of Trotskii's life, and perhaps as a result, it was also one of the least productive in terms of writing, especially autobiographical writing. When set against other volumes of his collected works, works written during the key year of 1917 are relatively few, especially in the context of his later struggle for domination over the interpretation of these events. When Trotskii arrived in Petrograd in May, he published a brochure, narrating his arrest and brief detainment in a British internment camp in Canada.<sup>10</sup> Trotskii mainly addressed political issues in this brochure, blaming the British authorities for his imprisonment and leaving almost no place for his own experiences except for a brief reminiscence, which would later be included in *My Life* (see below). In 1917 this short pamphlet was his last tribute to the genre of reminiscence, as the author now concentrated on the practical goals of the struggle for power, in which public speeches and endless meetings played a bigger role. Later, Trotskii claimed that right after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October he was "caught unawares" by the problem of his "government work," and he even "tried to stay out of the government, and offered to undertake the direction of the press." This statement is likely sincere, especially because the author mentioned his "nervous reaction after the [Bolshevik] victory."<sup>11</sup> Also, in the same chapter of *My Life* Trotskii noted that before anything else, he "had dreamed of becoming a writer" since childhood, but "subordinated writing, like everything else, to

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<sup>8</sup> Lev Trotskii, *Voina i revoliutsiia* (Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1922), 1: 45–70.

<sup>9</sup> Lev Trotskii, *Chapters from My Diary* (Boston: The Revolutionary Age, [1918]).

<sup>10</sup> Lev Trotskii, *V plenu u anglichan* (St. Petersburg: Kniga, 1917). See the English translation: "In British Captivity (1917)," *The Class Struggle* 2, 4 (1918), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1917/xx/captivity.htm> (accessed 19 April 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Leon Trotskii, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography*. (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 340. All citations below are from this edition; the translation was the same as in the 1930 edition.

revolutionary goals."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Trotskii's actual work took him far from his inclinations to be a writer, as he soon became the head of Soviet foreign affairs.

In 1918 Trotskii published a book originally titled *The October Revolution*, first in German and soon after in other languages. Its main goal was "to acquaint the workers of the world with the causes, progress, and meaning" of the revolution.<sup>13</sup> The author specified the date and place in his introduction—February 1918, Brest-Litovsk—thus informing his readers that it was "between the sittings of the Peace Conference that the different chapters of this sketch ... were put together."<sup>14</sup> It seems that Trotskii dictated the text to his stenographers and did not have time to make scrupulous edits, as he would have preferred. Apparently, these conditions legitimized the autobiographical comments that are sprinkled through the narrative that speak not only in the name of the Party ("we, the Bolsheviks"), but also on his own behalf. The result was an exemplary pamphlet, full of bright sketches and portraits, and not at all a meager analysis in the style of Marxist-positivism. Nevertheless, *The October Revolution* was still predominantly a propagandistic narrative that argued for the need for radical politics, even to the point of conflict with fellow Bolsheviks over the issue of seizure of power. Unsurprisingly, six years later Trotskii would write a special article on "The Lessons of October," which provoked political controversy and affected the historiography of the revolution as well.<sup>15</sup>

The introduction to the Russian edition of *The October Revolution* was written in August 1918, by which time Trotskii already headed the Commissariat of War and full-scale civil war was a reality. Paradoxically, Trotskii's writing activity only increased during these two years of deadly battles. The Civil War was not an obstacle to autobiographical writing for Soviet leaders like Anatolii Lunacharskii, the highly productive first people's commissar for enlightenment, who published a volume titled *The Great Upheaval* in 1919.<sup>16</sup> Trotskii also found time to write, and by May 1919, he had finished his autobiographical text, a six-page manuscript written entirely for the first and only Soviet biog-

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<sup>12</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 340.

<sup>13</sup> The English edition was published in 1919; Leon Trotskii, *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Trotskii, *History of the Russian Revolution*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick C. Corney, "Anatomy of a Polemic," in *Trotsky's Challenge: The "Literary Discussion" of 1924 and the Fight for the Bolshevik Revolution*, ed. Corney (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 6–85.

<sup>16</sup> Anatolii Lunacharskii, *Velikii perevorot (Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia)* (Petrograd: Izd. Z. I. Grzhebina, 1919), chast' 1.

raphy of Trotskii, title *Tribune of Revolution: L. D. Trotskii (Tribun revoliutsii: L. D. Trotskii)*.

Written by the journalist Georgii Ustinov and published in 1920, this biographical narrative built up Trotskii's leadership cult.<sup>17</sup> Excerpts from Trotskii's autobiographical account formed a substantial part of the biography, but it is not clear whether Trotskii wrote this text specifically for Ustinov's biography, or Ustinov simply used it as a primary source. The final product appeared to be very eclectic, an autobiography inside a biography that contrasted with each other. Although Trotskii never mentions Ustinov's almost entirely forgotten book in his writings, the episode is very telling for uncovering the nature of Trotskii's autobiographical practices; in this case, he was ready, in the midst of ongoing political and military hardships, to dictate a short narrative of his life to provide a propagandist with material to publish a book about himself, but later apparently decided not to be involved in producing or reproducing it.

It appears, however, that Trotskii not only prioritized these new attempts at autobiography, but also began republishing his prerevolutionary writings. At the beginning of 1919, he began to prepare a volume titled *The War and Revolution* and even wrote an "explanatory introduction" for it, but as he acknowledged three years later, he failed to gather all the required materials. One should emphasize the fact that in the midst of the Civil War, Trotskii was working on the introduction for a collection of his "articles, pamphlets and sketches," while acknowledging that by no means all of them were of "interest in and of themselves" (*samostoiatel'nyi interes*).<sup>18</sup> Yet Trotskii had a personal interest in the publication, as shown by the fact that he structured his introduction around autobiographical reflections that were written to be instructive to a "younger generation." This problem of youth education would later become central for Trotskii.

By late 1920 the Civil War was ending, and Trotskii quickly went back to publishing his writing. In 1922, in the introduction to the volume *War and Revolution*, he offered the following reason for his work: "The vanguard of the younger generation needs to know about days gone by, they need to know it as concretely as possible, in lifelike political images, in human figures."<sup>19</sup> In

<sup>17</sup> On the history of the "The Tribune of the Revolution," see Aleksandr Reznik, "Politicheskaia agiografiia L'va Trotskogo i sakralizatsiia revoliutsii: Sluchai Georgiia Ustinova," in *Politizatsiia iazyka religii i sakralizatsiia iazyka politiki v gody revoliutsii i grazhdanskoj voiny*, ed. B. I. Kolonitskii and A. Bustanov (St. Petersburg: Liki Rossii, 2018), 99–121.

<sup>18</sup> Lev Trotskii, "Vvedenie," in *Voina i revoliutsiia*, ed. Trotskii (Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1922), 1: 7.

<sup>19</sup> Lev Trotskii, "Predislovie k pervomu tomu," in *Voina i revoliutsiia*, 1: 6

the introduction to the second volume he insisted that "vivid factual material of the past is needed," and even "episodes from the struggle can help gain insight into a number of peculiarities of our past history, more than a set of generalizations, which are based neither on personal political experience, nor on the knowledge of facts of others' experience."<sup>20</sup> In 1922 Trotskii published the first part of his recollections, titled "It Happened in Spain" ("Delo bylo v Ispanii"). Based on his notebooks, the Spanish recollections are closer in style to Trotskii's first autobiographical text, *Tuda i obratno*.<sup>21</sup>

As the Civil War came to an end, many Bolshevik authorities came to recognize the importance of constructing historical memory.<sup>22</sup> In 1921 the official journal of the Historical Department of the Communist Party, *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* (Proletarian Revolution), published a short autobiography by Trotskii without the author's permission.<sup>23</sup> Like his 1919 recollections, this text is less individualistic and artistic than many of his other works, as the author aimed to produce a more factual account of his life. Originally it was not supposed to be published, as Trotskii wrote it specifically for the Central Committee sometime in late 1917. Although Trotskii abstained from writing an autobiography as such, the context of his other writings is very revealing. Beginning in 1922, Trotskii devoted his writing to the book *Literature and Revolution*, which soon became the subject of hot debate in party circles over policy in the field of literature.<sup>24</sup> In a way, *Literature and Revolution* also served as a tribute to Trotskii's (auto)biographical way of thinking, as his approach to the analysis of poets and writers was more individualistic and less like the positivistic Marxist mainstream writing of his time. Another source for contextualizing this tendency can be drawn from Trotskii's correspondence with Max Eastman, one of his most famous biographers and translators. Answering Eastman's request for help writing a biography in May 1923, Trotskii claimed that initially he wanted to refuse, but then changed his mind. His rationale is highly indicative of Trotskii's understanding of the role of biographies: "Whether good or bad, I had to play a certain role in the October Revolution.... Many people find a way to the general through the individual. In

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<sup>20</sup> Lev Trotskii, "Predislovie ko vtoromu tomu," in *Voina i revoliutsiia*, ed. Trotskii (Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1922), 2: 20.

<sup>21</sup> Lev Trotskii, *Delo bylo v Ispanii (Po zapisnoi knizhke)* (Moscow: Krug, 1926).

<sup>22</sup> See Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Trotskii, "Avtobiograficheskaia zametka," *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, no. 3 (1921): 244–49.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (New York: International, 1925).

this sense, biographies have their place.”<sup>25</sup> Trotskii agreed to assist Eastman in gathering materials but refused to read the biography’s manuscript or take responsibility for its contents. One has to wonder how Trotskii balanced his awareness of the political benefit of promoting biographies of himself with his sincere interest in the genre of writing per se.

Nevertheless, the next five years appeared to be the most suitable for implementing writing plans. By the beginning of 1924, when Lenin died, Trotskii was already losing the political struggle, and until 1926 he was engaged in a rearguard battle against his rivals in the party leadership, which he conducted almost exclusively through public writing. In spring 1924, Trotskii contributed to the growing field of “Leniniana” writings by publishing a volume titled *Lenin* with the notable subtitle *Materials for a Biographer*.<sup>26</sup> The sketches were full of vivid, detailed, and even shocking scenes, and were also imbued with autobiographical thinking. Once again, Trotskii remained faithful to himself by pointing out the peculiarities of his text as based on his “personal memory,” and thus “unfinished.” Trotskii focused on his dialogues with Lenin, which took place during crucial moments of the revolution and the Civil War. Some of his sketches appeared scandalous not only in eyes of the Party’s enemies, but also for fellow Bolsheviks. Thus, Trotskii recalled Lenin’s pragmatism when approving the populist slogan “rob the robbers” (*grab’ nagrablemoe*), as well as his later regrets about it.<sup>27</sup> In that respect Trotskii showed his loyalty to the idea of showing a real person, full of contradictions and individual features, an approach that was seen as problematic in the developing canonical literature of “Leniniana.” Doubt has little room in hagiography.

Trotskii’s *Lenin* became an object of criticism by party officials, mostly as part of the campaign against an introduction to Trotskii’s volume of collected writings that came out in late 1924, under the title *The Lessons of October*. If in the introduction to *Lenin*, Trotskii acknowledged that he consciously did not mention the “full range of developments” because they were “too closely related to current concerns,” then in *The Lessons of October* he changed tactics and directly confronted the discord within the Bolshevik leadership on the tactics of seizing power in 1917. One could not deny that this was a political move, whether it was predominantly directed against Lev Kamenev (who, according to the contributor to this volume Alexis Pogorelskin, “monopolized

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<sup>25</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (RGVA) f. 4 (Directorate of the People’s Commissariat of Defense), op. 14, d. 13, l. 20 (letter from Trotskii to Eastman, 22 May 1923).

<sup>26</sup> Lev Trotskii, *O Lenine: Materialy dlia biografii* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1924).

<sup>27</sup> Leon Trotskii, *Lenin* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1925), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1925/lenin/06.htm> (accessed 19 April 2020).



Lenin's archive"), or it aimed to discredit the ruling faction as a whole, in a similar manner to the intraparty discussion on the eve of Lenin's death.<sup>28</sup> What is more important for understanding both the changes in the political context and Trotskii's tactics during the succession struggle period is that in *The Lessons of October*, Trotskii avoided speaking in the first person or referring to personal recollections of 1917.

During the year 1925, Trotskii attempted not to act in a way that would give his opponents reason to renew their struggle, so the only two important conflicts of that year concerned matters of biographies. In 1925, Max Eastman published his book *Since Lenin Died*, which was scandalous from its inception due to its description of the aforementioned political struggle of 1923–24.<sup>29</sup> Eastman's account sounded notably complimentary toward Trotskii and critical toward his foes in the Politburo. What aggravated many about Eastman's opus was its inclusion of the so-called "Lenin's Testament," excerpts of which had already been published in the Menshevik press. The Politburo forced Trotskii to publicly refute the very fact that the document existed. A similar scandal emerged over Trotskii's article on Lenin in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The Politburo pointed to the need for its approval of the manuscript; although in the end they gave their approval, the whole affair was humiliating for Trotskii. Not surprisingly, the volume of Trotskii's collected writings that was supposed to include writings on Lenin was never published.

Soon afterwards Trotskii entered into open conflict with the mainstream Party, during which he avoided autobiographical writing as a genre. In 1928, after the defeat of the Left Opposition, Trotskii was sent into exile in Alma-Ata, where he continued to focus on political writing. This period revealed a strong gravitation toward an orthodox and dogmatic interpretation of the party's history and Lenin's legacy. Only involuntary exile from the USSR to Turkey in early 1929, which forced him to consider the commercial side of his writing, emancipated Trotskii as a political figure and as a writer and autobiographer.

### ***My Life***

What were the key features of *My Life*? How did Trotskii tell the story of his life as an individual and as a revolutionary? *My Life* by its very nature is a

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<sup>28</sup> The so-called "literature discussion," which followed on the initiative of the Stalin-Zinoviev faction, was not a discussion as such but a well-coordinated campaign of "denunciation" of Trotskii for his alleged attack on the authority of "Lenin's heirs" and "revisionism" of Leninism, during which the accused author thought fit not to respond publicly in self-defense. See Frederick C. Corney, ed., *Trotsky's Challenge: The "Literary Discussion" of 1924 and the Fight for the Bolshevik Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Max Eastman, *Since Lenin Died* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925).

highly individualistic text, yet in this case its preface gives the reader a clear vision of the author's explicit partisanship:

This book is not a dispassionate photograph of my life, however, but a component part of it. In these pages, I continue the struggle to which my whole life is devoted. Describing, I also characterize and evaluate; narrating, I also defend myself, and more often attack. It seems to me that this is the only method of making an autobiography objective in a higher sense, that is, of making it the most adequate expression of personality, conditions, and epoch.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, Trotskii rejected a commonsense "objectivity," while at the same time emphasizing his awareness that personal memory could be distorted, and stressing it in a most promising way for historians: "Needless to say, I have persistently checked my memory by documentary evidence." Moreover, in the preface Trotskii marked out his devotion to literature as such: "A well-written book in which one can find new ideas, and a good pen with which to communicate one's own ideas to others, for me have always been and are today the most valuable and intimate products of culture."<sup>31</sup> Overall, along with a myriad of documentary pieces, the book is full of aphoristic thoughts on the lifecycle of ideas and actions in individual and political communication.

The drafts of *My Life* reveal that Trotskii paid particular attention to his childhood; in contrast to the 1920s, it was described not just through details, but in a meticulous and particularly artistic style. It is safe to assume that this immersion in the world of childhood directly followed the literary tradition established by Lev Tolstoy's 1852 work *Childhood* and was perhaps also influenced by Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* (1856). An indirect confirmation for this can be read in the first line of the first chapter: "The idealization of childhood originated in the old literature of the privileged." However, it is more interesting how Trotskii legitimizes his interest in childhood: "[t]he unity of the personality passes through hidden channels from one world into the other. This, generally speaking, accounts for the interest that people take in the biographies and autobiographies of those who, for one reason or another, have occupied a somewhat more spacious place in the life of society."<sup>32</sup>

Characteristically for Trotskii, his first memories were linked to particular situations, which are interesting in their own right if read in the context of

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<sup>30</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, xxx.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. For example, the author's first recollection is about being breastfed. Trotskii analyzes his personality formation in the context of his family's history, but being a Marxist, he interweaves it into a broad economic and cultural context as well. He refers to another of his earliest recollections, which was a scene of social injustice towards the workers of his father's farm. At the same time, he obscures the actual size of his father's economic enterprise, as he obviously did not want to suggest that this future revolutionary came from privilege. His narrative of becoming a revolutionary is built on conflict and a break with his family, primarily his father (who is portrayed as more short-sighted than his mother). This would have been a typical story line within the Russian literary tradition of *Fathers and Sons*, yet Trotskii mentioned that during his 1906 trial, when he and his fellow-comrades from the Soviet of Workers' Deputies were charged with supporting an armed insurrection, both his mother and father, though not accepting his revolutionary activities, felt pride in their son: "I was an editor of newspapers, the chairman of the Soviet, and I had a name as a writer. The old couple were impressed by all this."<sup>33</sup>

The story line of becoming a revolutionary echoes similar canonical narratives. The hero's path is preordained by his sensitivity to injustice and sense of independence, mixed with exceptional skills and energy. While in school, Trotskii challenged the authority of a hated teacher, and then left his normal life to live in a commune with a fellow young socialist, starting his path as a professional revolutionary by failing to keep his underground activities out of the police's sight. Waiting in jail for his trial, Trotskii read extensively and worked on an article on freemasonry, about which he concluded: "I made no new discoveries; all the methodological conclusions at which I had arrived had been made long ago and were being applied in practice. But I groped my way to them, and somewhat independently. I think this influenced the whole course of my subsequent intellectual development."<sup>34</sup> This is one of many examples of how Trotskii pointed to his very individual way of becoming a revolutionary and a Marxist.

The revolutionary's story line coincided with a romantic one, as Trotskii began a relationship with a fellow socialist, Aleksandra Sokolovskaia, who became his first wife and the mother of their two daughters. Trotskii spent two years with his family in Siberian exile, where, in Trotskii's words, his "political self-determination was achieved." Once Siberian Social-Democratic underground organizations "got in touch" with Trotskii, he began by "rejoining the ranks of active struggle." By mutual agreement with Sokolovskaia, he

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 122.

decided to escape to Europe. The reason for that decision—a “natural” one for a revolutionary—was that Trotskii could no longer waste his talent outside of real politics. Obviously, the only thing that could make the young Marxist so confident in himself was his reputation as a gifted writer. Publishing under the name “Pero” (quill), he became one of the leading writers for *Iskra*, the central newspaper of the Russian Social Democratic movement, and, if not for the “founding father” of Russian Marxism Georgii Plekhanov’s objections, would have entered the editorial board.

There are two primary story lines in the chapters about Trotskii’s life in emigration. First, Trotskii directly and indirectly explains his refusal to join any major factions of the Russian Social Democrats by referring to rather concrete and individual issues of these conflicts. Second, he emphasizes the diversity of his personal and political experiences, which were not all about planning and preparation for revolution, as later Bolshevik master narratives required. Thus, he categorically confesses his mistakes and points to Lenin’s true nature as a leader. Among other features, and naturally for Trotskii, he found it important to point out Lenin’s remarks on his “literary style”:

It [Lenin’s comments on his writing style] is true in both respects, that is, regarding my tendency to florid writing, and also my disinclination to accept corrections. My writing was an affair of only about two years’ standing at that time, and the question of style held an important and independent place with me. I was just beginning to appreciate the flavor of words. Just as children rub their gums when they are teething, sometimes with quite inappropriate objects, I would pursue words, formulas, or an image in my literary teething-stage. Only time would purify my style. And as the struggle for form was neither an accidental nor an external thing, but a reflection of my intellectual processes, it is no wonder that, with all my respect for editors, I instinctively protected my still shaping [*sic*] individuality as a writer against the inroads of men who were already mature but differently constituted.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, Trotskii stresses the moments when political contradictions with Lenin were almost insignificant, such as during the 1905 Revolution or World War I. Regarding the first Russian Revolution, Trotskii pointed out his maturity: “I came to Russia in February of 1905; the other émigré leaders did not come until October and November. Among the Russian comrades, there was not one from whom I could learn anything. On the contrary, I had to assume the position of teacher myself.... In the years that followed I have

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

been learning as a master learns, and not as a pupil."<sup>36</sup> In the context of the ongoing ideological conflicts surrounding Lenin's legacy, the author revealed his reluctance to adjust his narrative to the Bolshevik-centered vision of the revolutionary movement's history. It was reasonable not to mention every episode of the disagreements with Lenin's faction, but, even more provokingly, Trotskii was willing to write about his friendship with such a controversial figure as Alexander Parvus. In contrast to the Stalinist orthodoxy of the party's history in the making, Trotskii was not keen to stress the importance of the period between two revolutions from a strictly political point of view. What is even more remarkable, though, are his quotations from the 1912 letter of Martov to Axelrod, where Trotskii was accused of reviving the "worst habits of the Lenin-Plekhanov literary individualism."<sup>37</sup> It would not be a huge exaggeration to say, that a characterization of this kind by his former friends indirectly attested to his affinity with the Bolsheviks, whom he finally joined five years afterward.

Trotskii's development in his second exile is framed, among other things, primarily along the lines of "we" against "them." Since this time was not a particularly interesting period of Trotskii's life, it is portrayed largely through portraits and self-reflections, such as the following: "The correspondence between Marx and Engels was for me not a theoretical one, but a psychological revelation. *Toutes proportions gardées*, I found proof on every page that to these two I was bound by a direct psychological affinity."<sup>38</sup> Not coincidentally, during these years in Vienna, Trotskii "became acquainted with the problems of psychoanalysis, which fascinated me, although much in this field is still vague and unstable and opens the way for fanciful and arbitrary ideas."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In the following paragraphs Trotskii developed this idea, once more revealing his individualistic way of thinking: "No great work is possible without intuition, that is, without that subconscious sense which, although it may be developed and enriched by theoretical and practical work, must be in grained [*sic?*] in the very nature of the individual. Neither theoretical education nor practical routine can replace the political insight which enables one to apprehend a situation, weigh it as a whole, and foresee the future. This gift takes on decisive importance at a time of abrupt changes and breaks the conditions of revolution. The events of 1905 revealed in me, I believe, this revolutionary intuition, and enabled me to rely on its assured support during my later life" (ibid., 185).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 225. Iulii Osipovich Martov (Tsederbaum) (1873–1923) was the leader of the Menshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party; Pavel Borisovich Axelrod (1850–1928) was a revolutionary and member of the first Russian Marxist organization, Emancipation of Labor, founded in 1883.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 220.

Trotskii's words on the 1912 Balkan War are filled with this psychological approach: "I understood even then that the humanitarian, the moral, point of view of the historical process was the most sterile one. But it was the emotion, not its explanation, that mattered then. A sense of the tragedy of history, which words cannot suggest, was taking possession of me; a feeling of impotence before fate, a burning compassion for the human locust."<sup>40</sup> By using the metaphor "locust," an atypical one in his vocabulary, Trotskii emphasized how ordinary people were mobilized against each other in the historical context of the unjust war. The 1912 Balkan War was an important turning point for Trotskii.<sup>41</sup> Here one can speculate about whether the original meaning of the word *perezhivanie* was different from the English translation, "emotion"; the Russian word more accurately conveys the meaning of "experience." Perhaps one of the deepest observations was written in the chapter about the beginning of the Great War:

I strode along the main streets of the familiar Vienna and watched a most amazing crowd fill the fashionable Ring, a crowd in which hopes had been awakened. But wasn't a small part of these hopes already being realized? Would it have been possible at any other time for porters, laundresses, shoemakers, apprentices and youngsters from the suburbs to feel themselves masters of the situation in the Ring? War affects everybody, and those who are oppressed and deceived by life consequently feel that they are on an equal footing with the rich and powerful. It may seem a paradox, but in the moods of the Viennese crowd that was demonstrating the glory of the Hapsburg arms I detected something familiar to me from the October days of 1905, in St. Petersburg. No wonder that in history war has often been the mother of revolution.<sup>42</sup>

Trotskii spent much of the war struggling with censorship in Paris, writing for Russian left internationalist socialist newspapers. He left disappointingly few memoirs on the Zimmerwald conference, mentioning that he formally did not belong to Lenin's revolutionary left wing of that movement, but at the same time claiming that "the essentially unimportant differences that still separated me from Lenin at Zimmerwald dwindled into nothing during

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>41</sup> See an insightful inquiry: Maria Todorova, "War and Memory: Trotsky's War Correspondence from the Balkan Wars," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 18 (2013): 5–27.

<sup>42</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 234.

the next few months." One can assume that if the "differences" were so "unimportant" Trotskii would have more vividly described his interactions with Lenin (in fact, at Zimmerwald they disliked each other), but, as the narrative invites us to think, the story of Trotskii's expulsion from France to Spain (and then from Spain to New York), was much more important to write about. In the case of Spain, Trotskii narrated a typical adventurous journey, full of irony about clumsy police officers. In New York, where he spent two and a half months, Trotskii opened the chapter with a wonderful remark: "New York impressed me tremendously because, more than any other city in the world, it is the fullest expression of our modern age."<sup>43</sup>

Trotskii enjoyed American democracy for only a short time, but fully embraced it. It likely helped that the huge Jewish émigré community was welcoming to socialism and found the exiled revolutionary very interesting. It is remarkable that Trotskii chose to tell about the emotional effect of the news about the February Revolution not only by contrasting the perception of events by right Social Democrats and "the working-masses," but also through the story of his son's recovery from diphtheria: "He was nine years old, but he realized definitely—and had for a long time—that revolution meant an amnesty, a return to Russia and a thousand other blessings. He jumped to his feet and danced on the bed in honor of the revolution."<sup>44</sup> Needless to say, this emotional style was widespread in Russia during the early post-February festivals of the revolution.

Before reaching Petrograd, Trotskii and his family were detained for a month at Amherst Internment Camp in Halifax, Canada. He devoted a whole chapter to this episode, under the provocative title "In a Concentration Camp." However, the story was narrated in positive colors, as Trotskii found himself among mostly German sailors: it "was like one continuous mass-meeting." Before leaving, Trotskii recounted how "one of the prisoners delivered a short speech acclaiming the Russian revolution and cursing the German monarchy. Even now it makes me happy to remember that in the very midst of the war, we were fraternizing with German sailors in Amherst."<sup>45</sup>

The way Trotskii depicts his personal experience during the early days of the revolution corresponds with his narrative in *My Life* on the general mood of the revolution.<sup>46</sup> In the chapter entitled "In Petrograd," Trotskii describes the joy inspired by the revolution by recounting the reception he met upon his

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>46</sup> On the emotional context of the 1917 revolution, see Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially chapter 1.

return as similar to the one Lenin had received on his arrival at the same place in April, a month earlier:

We were given a tremendous welcome at the Finnish terminal in Petrograd. Uritzky and Fyodorov made speeches, and I answered with a plea for the necessity of preparing a second revolution—our own. And when they suddenly lifted me into the air, I thought of Halifax, where I had had the same experience; but this time the arms were those of friends. There were many banners around us. I noticed my wife's excited look, and the pale disturbed faces of my boys, who were not certain whether this was a good or a bad sign; they had already been deceived once by the revolution.<sup>47</sup>

Here Trotskii carefully avoids explaining why only the second-ranked representative of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Fedorov, came to greet Trotskii, and why an immediate reunion with Lenin had not taken place. Similarly, Trotskii did not care to describe the activities of the political group *Mezhraionsy* (Interdistrictites), to which he belonged before joining the Bolsheviks in late July.

Instead, Trotskii chooses to focus on the revolution's true core element, the people. One of the most dynamic chapters of the book, "In Petrograd" also contains a story about a sailor named Nikolai Markin, who volunteered to serve as Trotskii's bodyguard and later died while serving as a political commissar on the Eastern Front in 1918. Trotskii published an obituary shortly after Markin's death, praising him as a true hero of the revolution. (Today in St. Petersburg, there is still a street named after Markin.) In *My Life* he left a very telling story that portrays the contradictory nature of the highly politicized Russian everyday life in 1917:

I did not even know that he existed when he undertook to care for my family. He got to know our boys, treated them to tea and sandwiches at the canteen of the Smolny, and, in general, provided them with the little pleasures that were so hard to get in that grim period. Without ever showing himself, he would drop in to inquire if everything was all right. I did not even suspect his existence. From the boys and from Anna Osipovna [the family cook], he learned that we were living in the camp of the enemy [Trotskii rented an apartment "in a big bourgeois house"]. Markin called on the head janitor and the House committee, not alone, I think, but with a group of sailors. He must have used some

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<sup>47</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 287.



very persuasive words, for suddenly everything about us was changed. And thus, even before the October revolution, there was a dictatorship of the proletariat in our house. Not until much later did we learn that the sailor, our children's friend, was responsible for all this.<sup>48</sup>

Framing the threats of violence used by Markin and his comrades to secure better conditions for Trotskii and his family as "very persuasive words," Trotskii was eager to excuse behavior that the moderate and counterrevolutionary press condemned in 1917 as "evil" and destructive: these publications portrayed Markin as a rebellious and irresponsible man with a gun, who was quite often associated with the anarchists and the Bolsheviks.<sup>49</sup> In Trotskii's view, Markin personified the virtues of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and Bolshevism. Obviously, Trotskii felt the need to justify the problematic image of revolutionary violence by praising people like Markin, pointing to their compassion and loyalty to the leaders with whom they shared political ideals.

Not surprisingly, Trotskii also paid tribute to the very emotional drive of revolutionary everyday life, poeticizing his experience of communicating with the masses. He chose to write about the mass meetings held in the Modern Circus in Petrograd, which was a "quite special" place for him, and was regarded as Trotskii's "fortress" by his opponents:

My audience was composed of workers, soldiers, hard-working mothers, street urchins—the oppressed under-dogs of the capital. Every square inch was filled, every human body compressed to its limit.... The air, intense with breathing and waiting, fairly exploded with shouts and with the passionate yells peculiar to the Modern Circus.... I spoke from out of a warm cavern of human bodies; whenever I stretched out my hands I would touch someone, and a grateful movement in response would give me to understand that I was not to worry about it, not to break off my speech, but keep on. No speaker, no matter how exhausted, could resist the electric tension of that impassioned human throng. They wanted to know, to understand, to find their way. At times it seemed as if I felt, with my lips, the stern inquisitiveness of this crowd that had become merged into a single whole. Then all the arguments and words thought out in advance would break and recede

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>49</sup> On the context of violence, see Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution: Mob Justice and Police in Petrograd* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

under the imperative pressure of sympathy, and other words, other arguments, utterly unexpected by the orator but needed by these people, would emerge in full array from my subconsciousness. On such occasions I felt as if I were listening to the speaker from the outside, trying to keep pace with his ideas, afraid that, like a somnambulist, he might fall off the edge of the roof at the sound of my conscious reasoning.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike such poetic descriptions of the people's revolution, Trotskii barely mentions routine politics, like meetings of the Central Committee (of which Trotskii became a member), in his narrative. It is logical to assume that Trotskii, who spent a month in the Peter and Paul Fortress, and then became the chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, had been too busy to engage with the senior Bolsheviks. Yet by the late 1920s, the most important issue was the degree of connection with Lenin, who went underground during the July Days. In contrast to Zinov'ev and Kamenev, Trotskii had nothing to proudly relate in this regard.

Although the period of the revolution and Civil War, like his section on childhood, receives the clearest narrative of *My Life*, one cannot call it extensively detailed. On that matter Trotskii left a remark: "The most important events are now the least charged with personal memories, for thus does memory guard against burdening itself too heavily."<sup>51</sup> Trotskii's dialogue with Lenin during the October takeover is among the most interesting in the text. Lenin and Trotskii were resting on the floor in Smolnyi: "We were lying side by side; body and soul were relaxing like overtaut strings. It was a well-earned rest. We could not sleep, so we talked in low voices. Only now did Lenin become reconciled to the postponement of the uprising. His fears had been dispelled. There was a rare sincerity in his voice."<sup>52</sup> The scene suggests intimacy established between two leaders after acquiring power, and is itself a subject for Freudian speculations. In the next chapter, tellingly entitled "In Power," Trotskii describes another moment with Lenin: "He looks softly at me, with that sort of awkward shyness that with him indicates intimacy. 'You know,' he says hesitatingly, 'from persecution and a life underground, to come so suddenly into power... He pauses for the right word. 'Es schwindelt [it makes one dizzy]!,' he concludes, changing suddenly to German, and circling his hand around his head. We look at each other and laugh a little."<sup>53</sup> Unsurprisingly, in the following chapters Trotskii wrote a lot on his relations with Lenin.

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<sup>50</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 295.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

While writing about the period of the Russian Civil War, Trotskii attempted to balance between dramatic and prosaic styles. Again he wove secondary, yet symbolic characters from his surroundings into his narrative. Among them were the aforementioned sailor, Nikolai Markin, and the young writer Larissa Reisner, "an Olympian goddess," in Trotskii's words.<sup>54</sup> Both served as political commissars in the navy, and both, in Trotskii's eyes, represented a revolutionary's main virtues: commitment, bravery, vitality, and so on. He paid a tribute to his special train and its celebrated role in the Civil War: "During the most strenuous years of the revolution, my own personal life was bound up inseparably with the life of that train," Trotskii writes.<sup>55</sup> It was not only a tribute to an institutional unit, which the train was, but also to its crew, which consisted of devoted Communists: "We always had in reserve a few zealous communists to fill in the breaches, a hundred or so of good fighting men, a small stock of boots, leather jackets, medicaments, machine-guns, field-glasses, maps, watches and all sorts of gifts."<sup>56</sup> Trotskii mentions three assistants by name, and from 1924 until the late 1920s they paid a high price for their loyalty to their leader, either committing suicide after being purged from the party, or being arrested by the secret police, when belonging to the opposition became illegal.

It is during Trotskii's account of the Civil War period that Stalin finally appears as a live subject. In the first, least biographical, chapter under the very telling title "'Trotskism' in 1917," Stalin is only mentioned among other opponents of Lenin's controversial assessment of the February Revolution, and at the time of writing *My Life* there was no need to debunk the later myth of the Stalin's great role in 1917.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, in the chapters "The Military Opposition" and "Disagreements over War Strategy," Stalin becomes the main antagonist of both the author and the policy that Trotskii shared with Lenin. In 1929 the head of the OGPU, the Soviet secret police, was Viacheslav Menzhinskii, and not surprisingly Trotskii revealed a story from 1919, when, according to his words, Menzhinskii "tried to find a different orbit for himself" by informing him that Stalin was "insinuating to Lenin and some others that you are grouping men about you who are especially hostile to Lenin."<sup>58</sup> What

<sup>54</sup> Katherine McElvanney, "Women Reporting the Russian Revolution and Civil War: The Frontline Journalism of Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams and Larisa Reisner," *Revolutionary Russia* 30, 2 (2017): 234.

<sup>55</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 411.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>57</sup> See the article by Alexis Pogorelskin in this volume.

<sup>58</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 449. See Stephen Kotkin's comment on this episode: "Instead of recruiting the powerful, sympathetic Chekist on the spot—as Stalin would have done—

stands out here is Trotskii's emotional reaction to this news and the emphasis he placed on Lenin's fiery reaction to the "trifles" as well. This episode is a key to Trotskii's strategy for narrating his relationship with Lenin as based on their personal trust (they were "fully in accord," as he put it).

However, in one of the next chapters, dealing with the history of factional struggle before and during the 10th Party Congress, when Lenin and Trotskii found themselves in different political factions, the author once again put his "relations with Lenin" in the center (and the title). Yet, he provides the reader with vague statements on the issue: "One cannot deny that the so-called discussion of trades-unions clouded our relationship for some time. Each of us was too much the revolutionary and too much the politician to be able or even to want to separate the personal from the general."<sup>59</sup> Trotskii did not provide a convincing explanation of the 1921 discord, neither in a political, nor in a personal way. Trotskii turned to stories from different contexts in order to stress the amount of trust Lenin had in him.

The issue of "the struggle for power" became the most crucial component of *My Life* from 1917 onwards. The period of struggle after Lenin's stroke in late 1922 appears to be both the most dramatic and the weakest part of the autobiography, in comparison with the parts devoted to the period of the war and the revolution. The patriarch of official Soviet historiography Mikhail Pokrovskii, despite his unquestionably biased vision (he was Trotskii's closest collaborator during the prewar years, though he goes unmentioned in *My Life*), made the essentially correct point that Trotskii basically avoids discussing the 1923 opposition in any detail.<sup>60</sup> It is true that Trotskii never gave proper attention to this story in his many writings. However, this moment is notable from another perspective, as it represents Trotskii's otherness. In fact, Trotskii not only points to the importance of coincidence in history ("[a]ll through the discussion of 'Trotskiiism' in 1923, I was ill"<sup>61</sup>), along with the role of individuals ("conspirators"), but he also discusses his illness in a very candid manner. One can think of it in gendered terms, as Trotskii challenged the Bolsheviks' normative masculinity, according to which a leader could not afford to be weak, or at least make his illness public.

An original and very telling autobiographical writing technique of *My Life* was the insertion of several biographical sketches, written by his wife

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Trotskii claims he rebuked Mężyński" (Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* [New York: Penguin, 2014], 329).

<sup>59</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 462.

<sup>60</sup> Mikhail N. Pokrovsky, "About a Certain 'Experiment in Autobiography,'" *The Communist*, July 1930, 652–58.

<sup>61</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 498.

Natalia Sedova. Perhaps pragmatically it was important to help Trotskii to finish the manuscript, but it also demonstrates originality in terms of gender: Sedova, after all, is not just a loyal companion of a "great man" but also a fellow-revolutionary.<sup>62</sup>

The book's final chapter, entitled "The Planet Without a Visa," like a few other chapters is not an autobiography per se; it is more like a political pamphlet, and represents a return to one of the first genres Trotskii had used decades before. Above all, it is a criticism of "democratic" governments, mixed with the author's philosophical reflections. In the context of autobiographical writing, the most telling passage is the following: "In prison, with a book or a pen in my hand, I experienced the same sense of deep satisfaction that I did at the mass-meetings of the revolution."<sup>63</sup> This is how Trotskii responded to what he called the "philistine attempt" to interpret his political downfall in terms of "personal tragedy," which also clearly manifested his deep inclination to live through writing.

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<sup>62</sup> See also Sedova's contribution to the biography of her husband: Victor Serge, [Natalia Sedova Trotskii], *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

<sup>63</sup> Trotskii, *My Life*, 582.