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# Revolutionary Biographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Imperial – Inter/national – Decolonial

With 5 figures

V&R unipress

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## Individualism and Psychology in the Auto/Biography of Lev Trotsky, 1900–20s\*

Lev Davidovich Trotsky occupies an exceptional place among revolutionary politicians of the 20th century. Trotsky's revolutionary career can be concisely outlined as follows: having become a revolutionary at the age of 17, at the age of 20 he was exiled to Siberia, from where he soon fled to Western Europe, where he was one of the leading journalists of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party. After the party split into the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Trotsky called for unity among the party's revolutionary elements. He took an active part in the revolution of 1905 and became known as the chairman of the Saint Petersburg Soviet (Council) of Workers' Delegates. In the years 1907–17, Trotsky was again exiled and subject to forced deportation, and he finally returned from the United States to Russia during the revolution, where he again headed the Petrograd Soviet. Trotsky played a leading role in the Bolshevik seizure of power, becoming the first People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs in Lenin's government and later the head of the military. By the time of Lenin's death in 1924, Trotsky was widely regarded as the second most important individual in the Soviet state, but because of his opposition to most party leaders, he was defeated in the political struggle for leadership. The Soviet leadership deported Trotsky from the USSR in 1929, depriving him of his citizenship and declaring him the main 'enemy of the people'. Until the end of his life in 1940, Trotsky devoted himself to a futile struggle to build an alternative to both Stalinism and social democracy.

The relevance of Trotsky's legacy today lies not in the tangible political project associated with his name but in his understanding of the politics and culture of the first half of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Trotsky stands out not only for the trajectory of

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\* Support from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics is gratefully acknowledged. The author would like to thank Prof. Dr. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk for providing ideal working conditions in Basel, and Dr. Siobhán Hearne for language editing.

1 For more about the state of affairs in Trotsky's biography, see Alexander V. Reznik, *Lev Trotskii as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution*, in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and*

his destiny but also for the importance he attached to the biographical genre of writing. In the political writings of Trotsky, living people often played a role that was equivalent to ‘impersonal’ historical processes. In a broad sense, biography permeated his narratives, within which the revolutionary’s own ‘self’ occupied a privileged place.

## Research Agenda

In 1929 (in 1930, according to the date of the publishing house) in Berlin, a two-volume book of Trotsky’s memoirs, entitled *My Life (Moia Zhizn’)*, was published with the demonstrative subtitle *An Attempt at an Autobiography (Opyt avtobiografii)*.<sup>2</sup> Translations of the text into the main European languages appeared. Financial hardship forced Trotsky to publish his book in the ‘bourgeois’ publishing houses, as the revolutionary was isolated in Turkey, trying to organise the work of the international left-wing opposition, as well as its press organ, the *Bulletin of the Opposition*. In his introduction, the author emphasised that his autobiography was a continuation of his political struggle. Despite the initial politicisation of the discourse about this book, *My Life* has become an important and popular historical source – and of course a source of information about Trotsky himself.<sup>3</sup>

As an author, Trotsky quickly began to draw attention from both his contemporaries and academic researchers. Among the first were the critics of Trotsky’s historical and biographical works published in 1924 and 1930.<sup>4</sup> Reviews of *My Life* were written not only by such major Russian emigrants as Mark Vishniak and Nikolai Berdiaev but also by others, including Siegfried Kracauer and Ernst Jünger. The first articles that appeared during the Cold War bore the imprint of ideological confrontation.<sup>5</sup> The famous psychologist Erich Fromm highlighted this problem in his review of Trotsky’s diary.<sup>6</sup> The research agenda of

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Eurasian History 17 (2016), pp. 181–91, URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/611036> (last access 21 July 2023).

2 Lev Trotskii, *Moia zhizn’*: Opyt avtobiografii, 2 vols., Berlin 1930.

3 See Wolfgang Lubitz/Petra Lubitz, *Mein Leben – Моя Жизнь: An Essay about Trotsky’s Autobiography and Young Trotsky (1879–1904)*, in: Lubitz’ *TrotskyanaNet*, URL: [http://www.trotskyana.net/Leon\\_Trotsky/Autobiography/autobiography\\_essay.pdf](http://www.trotskyana.net/Leon_Trotsky/Autobiography/autobiography_essay.pdf) (last access 21 July 2023).

4 Cf. articles and brochures from various authors collected in the following anthology: Aleksandr Reznik (ed.), *L.D. Trotskii: pro et contra, antologiya*, Saint Petersburg 2017.

5 Cf. an article by a former American communist who became one of the most famous anti-communist historians: Bertram D. Wolfe, *Leon Trotsky as Historian*, in: *Slavic Review* 20 (1961), pp. 495–502.

6 Erich Fromm, *An Estimate of Trotsky*, in: *Dissent* 6/22 (1959), pp. 196–7.

the articles devoted to Trotsky's autobiography went beyond a narrow range of questions regarding its conformity to the facts, etc.<sup>7</sup> One of the rare exceptions is the third volume of Isaac Deutscher's biographical trilogy, as well as an attempt to analyse the significance of autobiographical writing in the context of Trotsky's 'theory', undertaken by Baruch Knei-Paz.<sup>8</sup> Philip Pomper may have been the first to turn to the revolutionary's autobiographical narrative in order to reconstruct his 'psychology'.<sup>9</sup> More substantial research emerged after the incorporation of material from emigrant and declassified Soviet archives, on the basis of which authors such as Kirsty McCluskey<sup>10</sup> and Robert Service<sup>11</sup> managed to provide a more detailed picture of Trotsky's autobiographical writing through a comparison of his drafts, correspondences, and texts.

Without going into the details of historiography, it is evident that *My Life* occupies a privileged place in studies of Trotsky's work, as it is the central, concentrated product of his autobiographical narratives (not to mention the fact that the author often revised his previously published texts). However, the well-deserved attention given to the well-known book should not overshadow the broader picture of the author's 'autobiographical experiments', which constitute *My Life*. Recent studies have demonstrated the importance of autobiographical practices for the internal self-affirmation of Russian revolutionaries, the reciprocity of narrative content, and the dynamics of cultural and political contexts.<sup>12</sup> Dieter Thomä, Ulrich Schmidt, and Vincent Kaufmann, addressing the 'autobiographical turns' of the theorists of the twentieth century, have raised the question of "how theory and autobiography explain each other" by focusing on "the place between life and writing".<sup>13</sup> This research methodology is also applicable to the analysis of the practical activities of the revolutionary, although Trotsky's ambitions in theory were fully revealed in the last period of his life when

7 Gary Kern, Trotsky's Autobiography, in: *The Russian Review* 36 (1977), pp. 297–319; Geoffrey Swain, Silences in Trotsky's *My Life*, in: *Avtobiografija* 6 (2017), pp. 15–33, URL: <https://www.avtobiografija.com/index.php/avtobiografija/article/view/112> (last access 21 July 2023).

8 Isaak Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940*, London 1963, pp. 221–30; Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*, Oxford 1978, pp. 513–21.

9 Philip Pomper, *Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin: The Intelligentsia and Power*, New York 1996.

10 Kirsty McCluskey, *Reading Trotsky, Writing Bronstein: Assessing the Story of Lev Trotsky's Childhood and Youth, 1879–1902*, in: *Revolutionary Russia* 19 (2006), pp. 1–20, URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546540600670092> (last access 21 July 2023).

11 Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography*, Cambridge 2009.

12 See, e.g. Sandra Dahlke, *Individuum und Herrschaft im Stalinismus: Emel'jan Jaroslavskij (1878–1943)*, Munich 2010; Stefan Rindlisbacher, *Leben für die Sache: Vera Figner, Vera Zasulič und das radikale Milieu im späten Zarenreich*, Wiesbaden 2014; Ben Eklof/Tatiana Saburova, *A Generation of Revolutionaries: Nikolai Charushin and Russian Populism from the Great Reforms to Perestroika*, Bloomington 2017.

13 Dieter Thomä/Ulrich Schmid/Vincent Kaufmann, *Der Einfall des Lebens: Theorie als geheime Autobiographie*, Munich 2015, p. 8.

he was an emigrant. *My Life* marked a symbolic boundary at the “junction between life and writing” in the life of the revolutionary, combining his marginalisation as a ‘real politician’ and new positioning of himself as a ‘free’ journalist, although one primarily motivated by his own political agenda.

This peculiar emancipation of the writer coincided with the beginning of the ‘Stalinist revolution from above’, the discursive framework of which was partly based on the rejection of ‘Trotskyism’ – a label which was applied to phenomena considered most alien and hostile to the ‘Soviet’ project.<sup>14</sup> Rife with layers of political ideology, ‘individualism’ was the leitmotif of the accusations.<sup>15</sup> The philosopher, as well as talented biographer, Nikolai Berdiaev, in his brief review of *My Life*, gave its author a remarkable characteristic:

“a very typical revolutionary, a revolutionary of great style, but not a typical communist. [...] Trotsky is still a revolutionary in the old sense of the word, in the sense of the nineteenth century. He does not fit into the constructive period of the communist revolution. His idea of permanent revolution is a romantic idea. Trotsky still attaches importance to individuality, he thinks that individual opinion, individual criticism, individual initiative is possible, he believes in the role of heroic revolutionary personalities, he despises mediocrity and inaptitude. It is no coincidence that he was accused of individualism and aristocracy.”<sup>16</sup>

Berdiaev himself, of course, was not free from ideological predilections, but the majority of modern researchers agree on Trotsky’s inherent ‘romanticism’ and ‘individualism’.<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, a contemporary of Trotsky, came to the conclusion after reading *My Life* that it was radically different from all previous (in particular, ‘bourgeois’) biographies: the “self-portrait” expresses a “new type of personality” that “becomes real only through its transparency in relation to reality”.<sup>18</sup> Ernst Jünger’s verdict is also remarkable, as in his eyes Trotsky was not only a brilliant author but also a proponent of Western culture and an individualist.<sup>19</sup>

14 Dahlke, *Individuum und Herrschaft* (see note 12), pp. 273–346.

15 The most illustrative example: “bourgeois individualism from every line” – this was the verdict of Mikhail Pokrovskii, luminary of the official historical science of the USSR, taken from the review of *My Life* (Michail N. Pokrovskii, *Ob odnom opyte ‘avtobiografii’*, in: *Bolshevik* 7–8 (1930), p. 144).

16 Nikolai Berdiaev, *L. Trotskii: Moia zhizn’*, in: *Novyi Grad* 1 (1931), p. 93.

17 For example, after analysing the first articles by Trotsky, F. Pomper came to the conclusion that the author had turned into a “Marxist romanticist”. (Pomper, *Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin* (see note 9), p. 120). Deutscher pointed to a “blend of realism and romanticism” (*Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast* (see note 8), p. 220).

18 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essay*, Cambridge 1995 (translation of German edition 1963), p. 105.

19 Ernst Jünger, *Trotzkis Erinnerungen*, in: *Widerstand*, 5/2 (1930), pp. 47–51.

These observations by Trotsky's contemporaries raise the question of whether the label 'Trotskyism' had any real substance if we understand it as the individual style of Trotsky. This article is based on the thesis that 'Trotsky the politician' and 'Trotsky the writer' form a single whole, and his 'political' fate can be adequately understood only in the context of his extensive 'literary' work, in which the biographical genre originally played a major role. In other words, the birth of *My Life* had deep foundations, which were not reduced to the pragmatics of a power struggle but had their own 'poetics', which served as a cultural factor in politics. Thus, the aim of this article is to reveal the dynamics and content of Trotsky's autobiographical practices, or his 'experiments', by drawing attention to little-known but characteristic cases. The chronological end point of the research is 1923, the year of reference both for the 'biography' of the Russian revolution and for one of its main architects. As early as 1924, Trotsky was defeated in an internal party discussion, after which his memoirs of Lenin and the introduction to the collected works published under the characteristic name *Lessons of October* were systematically criticised, and the volume dedicated to Lenin, among others, was never published as part of the collection. In other words, until 1928, Trotsky experienced severe restrictions (essentially censorship) on the part of the political regime, to which he was still connected, and these circumstances require separate consideration.

## Forming a Style

In *My Life*, Trotsky offered a valuable confession that he had "dreamed of becoming a writer" since childhood but "subordinated writing, like everything else, to revolutionary goals".<sup>20</sup> This 'subordination', as I will show later, was not absolute. It is important that before his arrest and exile, Trotsky, although not seriously interested in theory, was a *Narodnik* and not a Marxist. Beginning in 1900, during the period of his Siberian exile, Trotsky wrote for the legal progressive newspaper *Vostochnoe Obozrenie*. In an article about Gleb Uspenskii, a well-known chronicler of peasant life, he is included in a polemic with Nikolai Mikhailovskii, the chief *Narodnik* theorist, in order to prove his loyalty to Marxism. But more importantly, in his frank admiration for the writer, Trotsky especially appreciated Uspenskii's talent in revealing the 'psyche' of peasants.<sup>21</sup> Uspenskii's works had a certain influence on the formation of Trotsky's style,

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20 Trotskii, *Moia zhizn'* (see note 2), vol. II, p. 62.

21 Lev Trotskii, O Glebe Ivanoviche Uspenskom, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. XX: *Kul'tura starogo mira* (nachalo XIX v.–1914 g.), Moscow/Leningrad 1925, pp. 41–67.

when he was writing for the *Vostochnoe Obozrenie* and in particular several articles entitled *An Ordinary Village (Obyknovennoe derevenskoe)*.<sup>22</sup>

From his first steps, Trotsky the writer actively used the concept of the ‘psyche’ and its derivatives. Moreover, from the article about the popular writer Leonid Andreev, it becomes clear that the author is familiar with the main concepts of Freudian theory.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in the article devoted to the poet Vasilii Zhukovskii, he gave a demonstrative characteristic of romanticism: “he sought to free the dark, uncertain and unconscious forces of the psyche from the straitjacket, which was quick to throw ideas at the spontaneous impulses of the soul. His guide was not the laws of resonant reason, but the wandering lights of the unbridled mysticism of feeling.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, Trotsky himself was averse to mysticism or spontaneity, but as a literary critic he recognised the importance of the irrational moment for artistic creativity (although Trotsky was not a supporter of psychoanalysis, he deepened his knowledge of Freudian theory and publicly took it under the protection of his authority as he regarded Freud’s concepts as a resource for strengthening the Marxist theory).<sup>25</sup> Vulgar rationalism in the form of the discourse of psychiatry also displeased the young revolutionary. Thus, in addressing the problem of the creative work of Nikolai Gogol, Trotsky emphasised: “Not a psychological, but a social-historical point of view can lead us to the path.”<sup>26</sup> Trotsky expressed similar thoughts in one of his first articles devoted to a lengthy discussion of Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas.<sup>27</sup> According to the fair point of an expert in Marxist literary criticism, during the period in which Trotsky’s views were formed, he

“was more concerned with the answer to the question about the reasons for changes in literary development than about the protection of the class point of view on what is happening in literature. His articles from this period feature the concepts of ‘environment’ and ‘social conditions’, which are not mechanically projected on the field of

22 The articles were included in the essay collection: Lev Trotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. IV: *Politicheskaia khronika: 1900–1914*, Moscow/Leningrad 1925, pp. 17–41. In 1923, Trotsky published a whole book about everyday life: Lev Trotskii, *Voprosy byta: Epokha ‘kul’turnichestva’ i ee zadachi*, Moscow 1923.

23 Lev Trotskii, O Leonide Andreeve, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. XX (see note 21), pp. 226–40.

24 Lev Trotskii, V.A. Zhukovskii, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. XX (see note 21), p. 4.

25 Isaac Deutscher, analysing *My Life*, made the right observation about the author: “He had gone into the subject of psychoanalysis deeply and sympathetically enough to know its pitfalls; and he had neither the time nor the patience for ‘whimsical and arbitrary’ guesses about his subconscious. Instead, he offered a self-portrait remarkable for its conscious integrity and human warmth” (Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast* (see note 8), p. 229).

26 Lev Trotskii, N.V. Gogol’, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. XX (see note 21), p. 16.

27 Lev Trotskii, *Koe-cto o filosofii ‘sverkhcheloveka’*, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. XX (see note 21), pp. 147–62.

artistic creation. The nature, the properties of the artist's personality [...] affect creative activity no less."<sup>28</sup>

Like other censored writers of his time, Trotsky was forced, in his work, to balance between his own ideology, the interests of readers, and the demands of censorship. The specifics of the genre of the articles expected from the author, however, allowed him to reveal his 'self'. This was especially evident in the brief essay under the expressive title *On Optimism and Pessimism: On the Twentieth Century and Many Other Issues* (1901), in which Trotsky calls himself 'a rebellious optimist'.<sup>29</sup>

## A Professional Journalist

After escaping from exile to Western Europe, the 'rebellious optimist' briefly became a permanent employee of *Iskra*, the central organ of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party. After the events of 'Bloody Sunday' on January 9, 1905, the first Russian revolution began, during which Trotsky not only conducted frenzied political activity but also translated one of the speeches of Ferdinand Lassalle. The preface to this speech contains a remarkable fragment:

"In his later years, Lassalle never enjoyed hiding – nor did he know how to hide – his own 'self', and it is no surprise that in this speech of a 24-year old youth he revealed himself completely, with all his strengths and all his weaknesses.

*Both in his speeches and in the political movement in general, Lassalle provides a classic example of revolutionary action. While Marx sees his first task and duty in explaining events and all their obscure causes, Lassalle endeavours above all to disclose the vital force that permits one to drive events forward in the present. [...] If we can say that Marx embodied the consciousness of the workers' movement, Lassalle was its intense will. This difference between two psychological types is remarkably evident in the speeches that Marx and Lassalle".*<sup>30</sup>

It is not only the author's attention to the psychological differences between Lassalle and Marx, of whom Trotsky was a supporter, that is characteristic here. One can safely assume that the author writes sympathetically about Lassalle's unwillingness to hide his 'self' and the primacy of action and will, thus perhaps indirectly confessing to the relative familiarity of such a 'psychological type'.

28 Mariya V. Mikhailova, *Marksisty bez budushchego: Marksizm i literaturnaia kritika (1890–1910-e gg.)*, Moscow 2017, p. 52.

29 Mark Steinberg rightly describes this essay as "typical of his intellectual and emotional style at the time" (Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905–1921*, New York 2017, p. 311).

30 Leon Trotsky, Introduction to Ferdinand Lassalle's Speech to the Jury (July 1905), in: Richard B. Day/Daniel F. Gaido (ed.), *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, Leiden 2009, p. 435.

In general, during his first emigration and the first revolution, Trotsky focused on more practical issues, earning himself political authority and even recognition outside the revolutionary community, primarily due to his role in the trial of the members of the Saint Petersburg Soviet in 1906, where he delivered brilliant speeches.

In early 1907, Trotsky escaped from his second term of Siberian exile. His first book in the second period of his emigration was titled *There and Back*.<sup>31</sup> Written in a short period of time for the Saint Petersburg modernist publishing house, it was published legally, despite the fact that it was a detailed reconstruction of his escape. Although the introduction and the first part are full of speeches on behalf of a group of revolutionaries, it was already written in the pure form of autobiographical prose. But it was also adventurous prose, filled with descriptions of nature and living characters with whom the author engages in dialogue. The second part, which tells the story of how they escaped through the Tundra on reindeer, is remarkable because of its anthropological sketches of the local population. It is no coincidence that Mikhail Gershenzon, a prominent employee of one of Russia's leading journals, wrote a positive review of *There and Back* in which he noted its literary merits.<sup>32</sup> Later, Trotsky republished these autobiographical reminiscences in 1919 and 1926 in separate books.

In the period from 1907 to 1917, Trotsky held a political position outside the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). Between 1908 and 1912, he published the newspaper *Pravda* for Russian-speaking readers, but in order to earn his living he continued his cooperation with the progressive non-socialist press, finally becoming a professional journalist and pamphleteer. Among other things, in 1912–13, during the Balkan Wars, he was a special correspondent for the newspaper *Kievskaja mysl'*. As a war correspondent in France, Trotsky published in *Kievskaja mysl'* until 1916, and it is telling that many of his articles were devoted to specific politicians, moreover, on the basis of personal memories.<sup>33</sup> Trotsky did not only devote his articles to prominent politicians. In 1914, he wrote two obituaries for legal and immigrant newspapers about the worker Petr Zlydnev, his colleague in the Saint Petersburg Soviet. These articles are the most characteristic of pre-revolutionary obituaries, as the author gave psychological characteristics and political assessments based on personal impressions.<sup>34</sup>

In 1926, as part of the collection of his works, Trotsky published a volume entirely devoted to specific individuals. Among the first to be published was an

31 N. Trotskii, *Tuda i obratno*, Saint Petersburg 1907.

32 Mikhail Gershenzon, review of: N. Trotskii, *Tuda i obratno*, Saint Petersburg 1907, in: *Vestnik Evropy* 42 (1907), pp. 806–8.

33 E.g. Graf Vitte, Evno Azef, Ledebur and Gofman, Kh. Rakovskii and V. Kolarov.

34 See Lev Trotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. VIII: *Politicheskie siluety*, Moscow/Leningrad 1926.

article about the leader of the Austrian Social Democrats, Victor Adler, written for *Kievskaja mysl'* in 1913. It is interesting not only for the author's autobiographical subjects but also for the author's afterword from April 1919: "Adler's psychological characteristics should not be identified with the evaluation of his policy."<sup>35</sup> As will be shown below, this is highly characteristic of Trotsky to comment on his old articles, even at the height of the civil war. Of course, the 'psychological' characteristics of the politician-reformist, given in a manner of admiration, completely contradicted Trotsky's political rhetoric in 1919. On the eve of the World War, it was generally common for Trotsky to be "oriented towards psychology, psychology though not of a social nature, but of a strongly individualised nature".<sup>36</sup>

Trotsky's articles on Jean Jaurès are even more illustrative of the glorification of individuality. In 1909, Trotsky argued that "the solution to the political role of Jaurès" lies *not* in the "power of individuality itself" but in the French "revolutionary tradition". The latter, however, according to Trotsky, "nests" neither in "material institutions" nor in "individual consciousness" but "somewhere deeper – in the sphere of the unconscious [...] In the mysterious repositories of the unconscious, somewhere in the last fibres, subjected to historical processing".<sup>37</sup> In an article written in 1915, a year after Jaurès' assassination, one can feel the factor of censorship on the one hand and the undisguised admiration on the other.<sup>38</sup>

In the first weeks of the war, while in Switzerland, Trotsky kept a diary, part of which he would later publish. The author shared his political prognoses (in many ways, realised) and everyday sketches with the diary or more likely with its future reader. Interestingly, Trotsky not only also shared autobiographical excursions from 1905 but also an explicit reflection on the practice of writing itself: "we have to devote ourselves to inner contemplation, and the unbearable form of the diary is now the only way to consolidate the fruits of this inner contemplation."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Trotsky did not address the diary regularly, rather only in situations of forced inaction and isolation. When Trotsky was forcibly expelled from France to Spain, he seemed to turn to this 'intolerable form' once again.

35 Lev Trotskii, Viktor Adler, in: *ibid.*, p. 16.

36 Mikhailova, Marksisty (see note 28), p. 186.

37 Lev Trotskii, Zhan Zhores, in: *id.*, Sochineniia, vol. VIII (see note 34), p. 17.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–32.

39 Lev Trotskii, Voina i revoliutsiia: Krushenie Vtorogo Internatsionala i podgotovka Tret'ego, vol. I, Petrograd 1922, p. 68.

## *The October Revolution*

The period of the revolution of 1917 was the most intense period of Trotsky's life but the least productive with regard to his literary work. Among the volumes of the collection of works, this key year appears to be a relatively modest one, especially against the backdrop of the subsequent struggle over how to interpret these events.<sup>40</sup> Arriving in Petrograd in May, Trotsky published a short brochure in which, in his usual colourful manner, he recounted a short stay in a British concentration camp in Canada.<sup>41</sup> In his own style, Trotsky presented the camp commander, Colonel Morris, as a personification of British imperialism. In order to express his opposition towards him and the Germanic prisoner officers, he contrasted them with the democratically-minded masses:

“When we were taken out of the camp, the prisoners gave us a farewell that was forever in our memory. Officers and non-commissioned officers, generally a patriotic minority, closed their ranks, but ‘our’ internationalists became two trellises along the entire camp, the orchestra played a socialist march, and hands reached out to us from all sides [...] One of the prisoners gave a speech in which he expressed his delight at the Russian revolution, sent his honest condemnation to the German government, and asked us to convey his brotherly greetings to the Russian proletariat.”<sup>42</sup>

In 1917, this pamphlet was the last tribute for Trotsky, although not the last one in terms of importance, because later fragments of the brochure were included in *My Life*. But the revolutionary focused entirely on the practical tasks of the struggle for power, so speeches at various rallies and meetings played a greater role than the usual literary work. This can be seen in the volume of his collection of works, so there was another “subordination of writing [...] to revolutionary goals”. Later sections of *My Life* suggest that after the conquest of power, Trotsky was “caught off guard” by the question of “government work” and even “tried to stay outside the government, offering to take over the leadership of the party press”. Explaining this, Trotsky mentioned his “nervous reaction after the victory” of the coup. As is well known, he quickly overcame this “nervous reaction” and headed the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs.<sup>43</sup>

In 1918, the brochure *The October Revolution* was published, first in German and then later in other languages. The author regarded his task as incorporating the events in Russia into the “public opinion” of Western workers.<sup>44</sup> The preface indicated the place and the date: 12 (25) February 1918, Brest-Litovsk, where,

40 Lev Trotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. III: 1917 g., pt. 2: Ot fevralia do Bresta, Moscow/Leningrad 1925.

41 Lev Trotskii, *V plenu u anglichan*, Petrograd 1917.

42 Trotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. III (see note 40), pp. 33–4.

43 Trotskii, *Moia zhizn'* (see note 2), vol. II, p. 62.

44 Lev Trotski, *Von der Oktoberrevolution bis zum Brester Friedensvertrag*, Belp-Bern 1919.

according to Trotsky, “between the sessions of peace talks, separate chapters [of this book] were sketched”.<sup>45</sup> In the preface to the Russian edition of the brochure, the author apologised for his “sloppy style”, explaining that “the book was not written at the table, but was dictated to the stenographers”.<sup>46</sup> The style was also influenced by the author’s new social and political role. The author’s narrative is dominated by the pronoun *we*, but Trotsky sometimes spoke not only on behalf of the party (*we, the Bolsheviks*) but also on his own behalf:

“We do not have any newspapers or documents at our fingertips [...] I will therefore try to remember the course and development of the October Revolution, retaining my right to then supplement and correct the narrative with documents.”<sup>47</sup>

Apparently, Trotsky did not finalise his dictations in any way. Thus, only two documents were published. It is not by chance that the expression “I remember” is used.<sup>48</sup> Trotsky’s study of the documentary sources legitimised his inclusion of autobiographical elements in the narrative whose task, of course, was broader.

The final product was a model pamphlet full of vivid sketches and anecdotes, rather than a dry analysis in the spirit of ‘Marxist’ positivism. In this respect, the use of the thesaurus of psychology in the conclusion of the booklet is illustrative. During the years of war, people were “mentally shaken”, but “psychologically the revolution meant the awakening of the human personality in the peasant masses”.<sup>49</sup> Trotsky wrote the foreword to the Russian edition while in the role of People’s Commissar for Military Affairs, when there was a full-scale civil war, the most important of whose ‘fronts’ was the ‘peasant front’.

## ***The Tribune***

During the Civil War in Russia from 1918 to 1921, Trotsky’s activities as writer and orator only increased. On 4 June 1918, Trotsky delivered a speech in front of a wide ‘Soviet’ audience dedicated to the deceased Georgii Plekhanov. Although the patriarch of Russian Marxism had become a political enemy of the Bolsheviks long before, Trotsky called for the respect of Plekhanov’s memory even in an “age when a separate human life seems to be nothing or almost nothing”.<sup>50</sup> Trotsky also saw these arguments as justified in reference to his personal biography.

45 Cited from: Lev Trotskii, *Oktiabr’skaia revoliutsiia*, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. III (see note 40), p. 257.

46 Trotsky concluded that “[i]t will take time before history arrives at the shores and creates the conditions for a more systematic and thorough work” (*Ibid.*, p. 256).

47 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 268.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

50 Lev Trotskii, *Pamiati Plekhanova*, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. VIII (see note 34), p. 65.

During the polemics with the left Socialist Revolutionaries at the Fifth Congress of the Soviets in July 1918, he said: “I myself, comrades, am not a lover of the military style, as such, I am accustomed to apply the style of a writer in life and literature, which I prefer most of all. But every activity has its consequences, including stylistic”.<sup>51</sup> Although these consequences had an obvious impact on the pamphlet criticising Karl Kautsky,<sup>52</sup> the style of the journalist retained its privileged place.

After becoming head of the Soviet military authorities, he arranged the work of his personal secretariat in such a way that his articles, transcripts of speeches, etc., were published regularly. The newspaper *V puti*, which was published directly on the People’s Commissioner’s train during his numerous trips to the front, looked like a specially printed organ of Trotsky. In September and October 1918, the newspaper’s editorial board made a huge contribution to the formation of the cult of the ‘leader of the Red Army’, before Trotsky himself proposed to the editorial board to “remove the inappropriate personal moment from the newspaper”, arguing that “the matter lays in the army, in the working class, in the peasantry, and not in individuals”.<sup>53</sup> The political language of war and revolution ensured the natural development of ‘chiefdom’ in what Trotsky might have called the psychology of the masses. From the analysis of the documents of the revolutionary’s personal archive, it is evident that he did not seek to consciously form his own cult, like Stalin. His praise of Lenin (speech *About the Wounded*), as well as the ‘leaders’ and ordinary ‘heroes’ of the Red Army strengthened the discursive practices of the cult of personality.<sup>54</sup> Characteristically, his speeches about the ‘martyrs’ Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were imbued with personal memories.<sup>55</sup>

The first biography of Trotsky – *The Tribune of the Revolution (L.D. Trotsky)* – was written by the journalist Georgii Ustinov. It is more appropriate to refer to this brochure as a modern hagiography, because it is imbued with the quasi-religious language of the propagandist, whose pathos of the neophyte in some places took on the form of a caricature.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless the text was a biography

51 Piatyi Vserossiiskii s’ezd Sovetov rabochikh, krest’ianskikh, soldatskikh i kazach’ikh deputatov. Sten. Otchet, Moscow 1918, p. 31.

52 Lev Trotskii, *Terrorism i kommunism*, Petrograd 1920.

53 Lev Trotskii, Pis’mo v redaktsiiu, in: *V puti*, 14 November 1918.

54 Alexander V. Reznik, *The Genesis of the Cult of Trotsky in the Russian Civil War*, in: *History* 378 (2022), pp. 910–26.

55 Lev Trotskii, *Karl Libknecht i Roza Liuksemburg*, in: id., *Sochineniia*, vol. VIII (see note 34), pp. 82–94.

56 See Aleksandr V. Reznik, *Politicheskaya agiografiia L’va Trotskogo i sakralizatsiia revoliutsii: sluchai Georgiia Ustinova*, in: Boris I. Kolonitskii/Alfrid K. Bustanov (eds.), *Politizatsiia iazyka religii i sakralizatsiia iazyka politiki vo vremia revoliutsii i grazhdanskoi voiny: Sbornik statei*, Saint Petersburg 2018, pp. 99–121.

because Ustinov stressed that he used ‘autobiographical notes’ he had received directly from Trotsky. Although the brochure was ready at the end of 1918, for unknown reasons its publication was delayed until 1920,<sup>57</sup> and the six-page autobiographical notes of Trotsky found in the archive were dated May 1919.<sup>58</sup> It is indicative that Trotsky saw merit in autobiographical narratives even in the midst of the civil war, as before during the ‘diplomatic’ crisis in Brest-Litovsk.

At that time, many of Trotsky’s speeches were transcribed and widely circulated. Thus, the comprehensive report that was read at the meeting of the Voronezh Soviet on 18 November 1918 was published in a separate brochure.<sup>59</sup> This speech was intended for a wider audience and was clearly propagandistic in nature. Describing Western European politics, Trotsky enlivened it with his own memories:

“I remember the first period of the war [...] fate gave me the opportunity during the first two and a half years of the war to observe its reflection in the minds and policies of the bourgeois classes and the working masses of different countries [...] I had the opportunity to spend quite a lot of time in Germany, I saw these leaders relatively up close [...] I could observe it with my own eyes [...] in New York, I watched tens of thousands of women and mothers take to the streets in protest”.<sup>60</sup>

Such references to Trotsky’s memory were combined with praise for “the firm materialistic method of historical destiny, a method that is used in every science – the method of strict, ‘dispassionate’, severe study of the accumulated facts in order to establish from here [...] the correct prediction of the future”. But this “Marxism”, he stressed, “does not contradict the hottest revolutionary temperament”.<sup>61</sup> The leaders of German social-democracy, in the eyes of Trotsky, were guilty of “not having a spark of revolutionary proletarian enthusiasm in their souls”.<sup>62</sup> It is not only a reference to “temperament” (or will, as in the preface to Lassalle’s speech!) that is indicative here but also the situation in itself. Here, the head of the military authorities engages in a vague discussion before, moving on to the situation in Japan and then suddenly asking: “In general, comrades, what is consciousness? This is the laziest thing, although it is also the human psyche. Subjectivists – our Social Revolutionaries – believed that everything moves forward with consciousness. This is not true.” Answering his question, the speaker called consciousness “the laziest factor in all history” and then philosophised that “it is necessary for external material facts to push, hit the

57 Georgii Ustinov, *Tribun revolutsii* (L.D. Trotskii), Moscow 1920, p. 5.

58 Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RGASPI), F. 325, Op. 1, D. 14.

59 Lev Trotskii, *Na strazhe mirovoi revolutsii*, Moscow 1918.

60 Lev Trotskii, *Na strazhe mirovoi revolutsii*, in: Lev Trotskii, *Kak vooruzhalas’ revolutsiia* (Na voennoi rabote), vol. 1, 1918, Moscow 1923, pp. 378–89.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 378–9.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 382.

people, hit the classes on the back, hit them on the back, on the back of the head, on the top of the head, until this damned consciousness wakes up [...] and begins to waddle after the facts”.<sup>63</sup>

Already in early 1919, Trotsky began to prepare the collection of *War and Revolution* and in March of the same year wrote an ‘explanatory introduction’, although he recognised three years later that he was unable to collect the necessary articles and materials.<sup>64</sup> The context requires emphasis as March 1919 was the height of the civil war, and the head of the military authorities was working on the introduction of his “articles, pamphlets, and essays”, although he recognised that not all of his writings were “interesting by themselves”.<sup>65</sup> Yet behind the publication was the deep interest of Trotsky himself, who built his introduction on autobiographical excursions and descriptions of the leaders of social democracy, who could appear instructive for the “younger generation”. Interestingly, he first spoke about his longstanding cooperation with *Kievskaiia mysl’*, which in the context of the civil war and the ban on the “bourgeois press” could sound strange, but the author emphasised the former opportunities that he was given to “cover events, especially foreign ones, even from a social-revolutionary point of view”.<sup>66</sup> The publication of a short diary which Trotsky kept in Switzerland during the first weeks of the war, is more indicative because it was based on “the need to be aware of what is happening”.<sup>67</sup>

## “Biographies Have Their Right”

By the end of 1920, the civil war was coming to an end. Therefore, it was no coincidence that this coincided with the creation of the *Istpart* – The Commission of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on the History of the October Revolution – to create an official narrative on the history of the revolution and the party, which in the long run was one of the key institutions for the ideological legitimisation of power.<sup>68</sup> On 7 November 1920, Trotsky took part in the meeting of the participants of the October coup and the transcript was published two years later in *Istpart*’s journal.<sup>69</sup> Trotsky’s narrative

63 Ibid., p. 390.

64 Lev Trotskii, *Predislovie k pervomu tomu*, in: id, *Voina i revoliutsiia* (see note 39), p. 6.

65 Lev Trotskii, *Vvedenie*, in: id., *Voina i revoliutsiia* (see note 39), p. 7.

66 Ibid., p. 10.

67 Ibid., p. 9.

68 Frederick Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Ithaca 2004.

69 Lev Trotskii, *Vospominaniia ob Oktiabr’skom perevorote*, in: *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia 10 (1922)*, pp. 52–64. Cf. as part of the essay collection: Trotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. III (see note 40), pp. 90–100.

contained vivid episodes, one of them even quite frankly humorous, when the Menshevik Fedor Dan identified the well-dressed Lenin.<sup>70</sup> With the end of the civil war, both Trotsky and other writers were freeing up their resources in order to write biographies. In 1921, Dmitrii Sverchkov, a personal friend and comrade of Trotsky from the Saint Petersburg Soviet, wrote memoirs<sup>71</sup> and in 1922, as part of the activities of *Istpart*, a study of the first revolutionary organisation (which included Trotsky) was published.<sup>72</sup> In these and other projects, Trotsky himself is involved only indirectly (in the preface, a letter, etc.).

Quite quickly, Trotsky returned to the idea of publishing his works. In 1922, in the preface to the first volume of the collection *War and Revolution*, he outlined the following task: “The advanced representatives of the young generation need to know about yesterday, it is necessary to know as concretely as possible, in living political images, in human figures”.<sup>73</sup> In the preface to the second volume, he again insisted that “we need the living factual material of the past” and even “episodes of struggle can help to better, to more concretely and more clearly understand a number of features of our recent history, than a number of generalisations, not based on either personal political experience or knowledge of the facts of someone else’s experience”.<sup>74</sup> Trotsky would soon repeat this idea:

“We cannot speak to these young people with those ready-made formulas, phrases, turns of phrase, and words that matter to us, the ‘old people’, because they are derived from our previous experience, and for them they remain just empty sounds. It is necessary to learn to speak to them in their language, i.e. in the language of their experience.”<sup>75</sup>

In this matter, Trotsky did not separate theory from practice. In 1922, he published the first part of his memoirs, *It Happened in Spain (Delo bylo v Ispanii)*, first in the magazine *Krasnaia nov’* and, four years later, in a separate book.<sup>76</sup>

70 The plot served as the basis for Mikhail Avilov’s painting *Lenin and Trotsky in Smol’nyi on the Eve of October* (1923).

71 Dmitrii Sverchkov, *Na zare revoliutsii*, Leningrad 1921.

72 Vladimir I. Nevskii, ‘Iuzhno-russkii rabochii soiuz’ v gorode Nikolaeve v 1897 g. S prilozheniem pis’ma L.D. Trotskogo, Moscow 1922.

73 Trotskii, Predislovie k pervomu tomu (see note 64), p. 6. At the end of 1926 in the obituary on Leonid Krasin, Trotsky almost literally reproduces this idea: “The task is to bring the new generation closer to our fresh past, not only through common historical schemes, but also through living images.” (Lev Trotskii, Krasin, in: Lev Trotskii, *Portrety revolyutsionerov*, Moscow 1991, p. 226).

74 Lev Trotskii, Predislovie ko vtoromu tomu, in: id, *Voina i revolyutsiya*, vol. II, Petrograd 1922, p. 20.

75 Lev Trotskii, ‘Èpocha ‘kul’turnichestva’ i ee zadachi: Gazeta i ee chitatel’, in: *Pravda* 145, 1 July 1923, p. 2.

76 Lev Trotskii, *Delo bylo v Ispanii (Po zapisnoi knizhke)*, Moscow 1926. Also included in the following collection of essays: Lev Trotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. IX: *Evropa v voine*, Moscow/Leningrad 1927, pp. 256–323.

Based on his notebooks, the Spanish memoirs are similar in style to the author's first autobiographical experience mentioned above – *There and Back*. Both works were directly and indirectly used in *My Life*. Finally, the journal of the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles (*Obshchestvo byvshikh politkatorzhan i ssyl'noposelentsev*) published the memoirs of Trotsky from his first period of Siberian exile, and though they were only four pages long, they were fully consistent with the genre of autobiography.<sup>77</sup>

Trotsky's correspondence with the radical American writer Max Eastman, a future supporter and translator of Trotsky and later a famous anti-communist, deserves special interest. Eastman turned to Trotsky for help in writing his biography. In a brief response on 22 May 1923, Trotsky claimed that he first wanted to refuse Eastman but then changed his mind, giving this aphoristic justification: "For better or worse, it befell me to play a certain role in the October revolution and its further development. Many people find their way to the *general* through the *personal*. In that sense biographies have their right."<sup>78</sup> In the end, Trotsky agreed to help with the collection of facts to avoid major mistakes but refused to review the entire manuscript, so that he was not responsible for it. Trotsky supported Eastman, for example, in obtaining a guest ticket to the party congress, describing him as a "famous writer".<sup>79</sup> In 1925, two books by Eastman were published. The more famous of the two was *Since Lenin Died*, which outlined the history of the struggle for power, written in a complementary manner to Trotsky, but the second, less known, was devoted to Trotsky's childhood and youth.<sup>80</sup> Eastman would later become Trotsky's English translator and even his literary agent.

The events of the internal party struggle, which took place at the turn of 1923–4, explain a lot about Trotsky's perception of his literary activity. His opponents reproached him for the inappropriate use of time by a member of the Politburo. In response, Trotsky explained that he worked on books about literature and life while under the instructions of his doctors to rest. It was during these crucial years that Trotsky, in his polemics with his opponents, often resorted to *ad hominem* arguments, which most clearly expressed the continuity of his style in literature and politics.<sup>81</sup> Due to the publication of the book *About Lenin: Materials for the Biographer* (*O Lenine: Materialy dlia biografy*) and then the article

77 Lev Trotskii, Vospominaniia o moei pervoi ssylke, in: Katorga i ssylka 5 (1923), pp. 91–5.

78 Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), F. 4, Op. 4, D. 13, L. 20. The translation is taken from Max Eastman, Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth, New York 1925, p. vii.

79 RGVA, F. 4, Op. 14, D. 51, L. 110, p. 139.

80 Max Eastman, *Since Lenin Died*, London 1925; id., *Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth*, New York 1925.

81 See Aleksandr Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi: levaia oppozitsiia i politicheskaiia kul'tura RKP(b), 1923–1924 gody*. Saint Petersburg 2018.

*Lessons of October (Uroki Oktiabria)*, which served as the introduction to the collection of works for 1917, Trotsky was criticised in a coordinated political campaign.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusions

In the period from 1924 until his exile in 1928, Trotsky very much subordinated his style of performance to the direction of his literary activity. Political processes, which Trotsky himself called counter-revolutionary, also affected his texts as, following the rhetoric of the political regime, they obeyed ‘discipline’. During this period, almost all autobiographical experiments were connected with the genre of the obituary. His intermittent diary entries were limited to political questions. His correspondence, which deserves attention in studies of the autobiography, has not been preserved. On the contrary, the last decade of Trotsky’s life in exile brought a consistent growth of the auto- and biographical narrative: the projects of Lenin’s and Stalin’s biographies, the collection *Us and Them (My i oni)*, and other projects, though mostly unrealised. Nevertheless, in his two largest works – *The History of the Russian Revolution (Istoriia russkoi revoliutsii)* (1930) and especially in *The Revolution Betrayed (Predannaia revoliutsiia)* (1936) – Trotsky avoids speaking in the first person. However, in those same years he kept a diary, which, together with his notebooks, reflected his thoughts in a franker form than ever before. Ultimately, his will and testament, written six months before his murder, is the best proof of the author’s ingrained autobiographical practices.<sup>83</sup>

This article attempts to reconstruct the dynamics of Trotsky’s autobiographical creativity in the most general sense. According to his own words, Trotsky “subordinated writing [...] to revolutionary goals”,<sup>84</sup> but, although he did not return to the goals of the ‘writer’ as such, the ‘revolutionary’ in Trotsky did not submit entirely to the loss of the ‘writer’. The convergence of ‘Trotsky the writer’ and ‘Trotsky the revolutionary’ are held in the border zone of pragmatics and rhetoric, politics and literature. The author did not choose the conditions, as his Siberian exile narrowed down the range of possibilities, the years of revolution dictated the priority of ‘practice’ and forced isolation led to a diary, etc. The incursion of the ‘subordinate’ writer in the routine of the revolutionary often occurred in the most unexpected moments, for example during the Civil War.

82 See Frederick Corney, Anatomy of a Polemic, in: id. (ed.), Trotsky’s Challenge: The ‘Literary Discussion’ of 1924 and the Fight for the Bolshevik Revolution, Leiden 2015, pp. 6–85.

83 Philip Pomper (ed.), Trotsky’s Notebooks, 1933–1935: Writings on Lenin, Dialectics, and Evolution, New York 1998.

84 Trotskii, Moia zhizn’ (see note 2), vol. 2, p. 62.

Trotsky's identity was based on his professional vocation as a journalist and writer, which did not prevent him from simultaneously perceiving himself as a participant, a witness and an historian, because, according to Trotsky, biographies have their right. Therefore, in many of his texts, Trotsky the narrator constructs a space 'inhabited' by living people, in which individuality and agency, including his own, are carefully drawn and 'animated' by literary means. This was the *Attempt at an Autobiography*, which was not accidentally written in the subtitle of *My Life*.

Translated from Russian by Joshua R. Kroeker