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## Silences in Trotskii's *My Life*

Trotskii's autobiography *My Life* is a lively and fascinating account of his childhood on a Jewish farm in Ukraine, his schooling and early revolutionary activity, his dramatic escape from Siberia in 1906, and his exploits at the front during the Russian Civil War. Yet it is an autobiography written with a special mission, the mission to defeat Stalin. So there are self-serving moments, misinterpretations and in particular silences, silences on pre-revolutionary disagreements with Lenin and silences on his disagreements with Lenin during the course of the revolution and in its aftermath

Until the October Revolution of 1917, Trotskii kept body and soul together by working as a journalist. His war reporting from the Balkans in 1912-13 was a regular feature in the newspaper «Kievskaja mysl'». His reports from the front line were interspersed with traveller's tales and meditations on the horror of war and the thin veneer of civilisation: "the chaotic mass of material acquisitions, habits, customs and prejudices that we call civilisation hypnotises us all, inspiring false confidence that the main thing in human progress has already been achieved – and then comes war, and reveals that we have not yet crept on all fours from the barbaric period of our history". Trotskii could write with passion, humour, irony and subtlety – if his life had worked out differently, he would have remained a journalist. Indeed, in October 1917 he had assumed

that Lenin would ask him to take charge of the Soviet press, since "from my youth, or to be more precise, from my childhood in, I dreamed of being a writer" (Swain 2006: 46, 217).

It is no surprise, therefore, that when Trotskii is describing his extraordinary life, he tells a tale which is both gripping and revealing. Sometimes it is a simple aside which grabs the attention. Referring to his first arrival in Vienna, Trotskii recalls: "Vienna surprised me most of all by the fact that I could understand none, despite my study of German at school" (Trotsky 1930: 106) – how many tourists have faced that self same problem!?' Other incidental details enliven

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<sup>1</sup> For this article I have used the freely available online copy of the original 1930 Charles Schribner's Sons New York edition, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/>.

the story. Writing about his brief stay in New York in 1917 just before the overthrow of the Tsar, he recalled how “at time the telephone was [the boys] main interest; we had not had this mysterious implement in Vienna or Paris” (Trotsky 1930: 210). Other passages, of course, reflect the drama of great historical turning points. Describing the level of semi-organised chaos during the October Revolution, he recalls: “all that week I had hardly stepped out of Smolny; I spent the nights on a leather couch without undressing, sleeping in snatches and constantly being roused by couriers” (Trotsky 1930: 252).

However, although grippingly written, Trotskii does not offer a rounded assessment of his life. The book was written in extraordinary circumstances. Trotskii was exiled to Central Asia in January 1928 and then, because he refused to end his factional political activity, he was exiled to Turkey in February 1929. Although the Soviet Government had given him a resettlement grant of \$1,500, he was quickly short of money. He had begun work on *My Life* while in Central Asia, and in Turkey the manuscript was quickly finished, being published in New York in 1930; royalties from it became a major source of income during

the exile years. Understandably perhaps, the circumstances in which Trotskii wrote his autobiography did much to govern what he chose to remember and what he preferred to pass over in silence.

### *Frank Revelations and Gripping Yarns*

Trotskii is at his most lively, and his most frank, when he gives his account of his childhood, which was extraordinary by any yardstick. The future leader of Russia’s proletariat, and, as he anticipated, the world’s proletariat, was born the son of a semi-literate Jewish kulak, a rich peasant on the way up who lived fifteen miles from the nearest post office in the heart of the Ukrainian countryside. It was some journey from what Marxists used to call the idiocy of rural life to what he would become, a precocious, urbane and urban revolutionary. Trotskii’s childhood was clearly a happy one and his retelling of it is frank and engaging. He has no embarrassment about recalling the rough and tumble of growing up, quite happy to recall incidents which other revolutionary memoirists might prefer not to mention. He wet his trousers in public when aged two, he was frightened by a grass snake, he

fell off a horse; for much of the first nine years of his life, he played dolls with his sisters. He enjoyed family card games and egg painting at Easter; later he became adept at croquet a favourite game of his aspirational parents (Trotsky 1930: 2, 6-7, 41). They realised at once that their son was special. To Trotskii's great embarrassment, his proud parents would ask him to recite the poems he had written to visiting neighbours. And so it was essential that he should go to a decent school. Despite his tears on leaving his village home, Trotskii's life was soon transformed by moving in with his mother's nephew Moisei Spentzer in Odessa and attending the *Realschule* there. He was, he recalled, "always an accurate and diligent schoolboy" and reading soon became his obsession: he "devoured books ravenously and had to be forced to go out for walks". And when he was not reading, he was visiting the theatre and opera, always discussing the latest production with Spentzer (Trotsky 1930: 28, 43). Soon all this academic prowess had an impact on his eyesight, and he took to wearing glasses. This, however, was no sign of weakness as far as he was concerned, recalling that, "the glasses gave me a sense of added importance". May be he was

right, for at this time his first hesitant and very unsuccessful encounters with teenage girls took place. By the time he left the *Realschule* he was a typical adolescent. On the last day of school, even though his crowd of friends were "afraid of our own daring", they nonetheless "wore neckties and smoked cigarettes" and set off for the Summer Garden where "gay cabaret actresses sang on the open stage and where schoolboys were strictly forbidden to enter" (Trotsky 1930: 40, 56-57).

A right of passage of a very different kind occurred when Trotskii moved to Nikolaev to prepare for university entrance. Until then he had always returned to the village in the holidays. Yet, to his mind his Odessa years had pulled him further and further away from his family. In the village "everything seemed the same and yet quite different", it was as if "objects and people looked the counterfeit of themselves". One memory was of making a fool of himself while trying to scythe while wearing "a freshly laundered duck suit with leather belt" which made him look "simply magnificent". More seriously, the new man of science was deeply frustrated when the peasants refused to use mathematics to calculate the area of a field, preferring their tra-

ditional method using rule of thumb. He was, therefore, already beginning to wonder about his future when he arrived in Nikolaev in 1896, the year that became “the turning point of my youth” (Trotsky 1930: 59-60, 66, 73).

This moment also marks a turning point in the autobiography. Trotskii’s political career is about to begin, and for the first time there is silence as a potentially embarrassing political ‘mistake’ is pushed to one side. Trotskii began his political career as a Populist rather than a Marxist. He does not deny this in *My Life*, but it requires careful reading to pick it up. The man who turned him into a revolutionary was Franz Shvigoivskii, who worked as a gardener near where Trotskii was lodging in Nikolaev, and encouraged Trotskii and his friends to establish a revolutionary ‘commune’. Shvigoivskii is referred to as “a Czech”, but he was also a Populist exile, for it is clear from the literature he gave Trotskii to read that he was a Populist by political persuasion. Writing in exile, Trotskii can comment: “there was an odour of putrefaction emanating from Populism.” That, however, was not what he felt at the time. True, he does comment in an aside that Marxism repelled by its so-called

‘narrowness’, and he does mention that he wrote for a Populist journal, but the ardour of his commitment to Populism does not come across in *My Life* (Trotsky 1930: 74, 76).

Aleksandra Sokolovskaia, the future mother of his two daughters, was the only Marxist in the Shvigoivskii cell, and was subjected by Trotskii to regular baiting: the worst incident occurred on New Year’s Eve 1896 when Trotskii, instead of toasting the New Year, called on all present to issue “a curse on all Marxists!”. It was only in 1899 at the time of his first imprisonment that he finally decided to reject Populism and become a Marxist, after reading a French translation of the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola. Thus all Trotskii’s work with industrial workers in Odessa and Nikolaev, work which would inform his future activity, was carried out while he was an opponent of Marxism (Swain 2006: 11-12). His statement that he drafted the constitution of the South Russian Workers’ Union “along Social Democratic lines” is disingenuous. The comment that, in 1897, the year of the Southern Russian Workers’ Union, he had “tried to ward off . . . Marxist doctrines” is rather nearer the truth (Trotsky 1930: 84, 97).

There will be other, more significant silences as *My Life* continues. The lively, engaging style so characteristic of Trotskii's description of his youth does not disappear, but as the years pass there are more and more political axes to grind. Nevertheless, Trotskii's account of his trial in 1906, his exile and subsequent escape sparkles. In autumn 1905, the climax of that year's revolutionary events, Trotskii had been at the height of his powers as chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet; he had fleetingly been in a strong enough position to negotiate with the Tsar's government. Arrested in December 1905, his prison regime was relaxed, with the guards 'winking' when Trotskii exchanged letters and manuscripts with his wife; one even asked for a signed copy of his pamphlet defending the work of the Soviet. At the trial he recalled how his mother wept silently as he made his defence speech, while his father "was pale, silent, happy and distressed, all in one". Once in exile, a fellow revolutionary "taught me how to simulate sciatica", enabling him to avoid surveillance, contact the drunkard owner of a deer-sled and flee along the course of the frozen river Sosva. It was, he recalls "a magnificent ride through a desert of virgin snow all covered

with fir trees and marked with the foot prints of animals". When a deer went lame, a replacement had to be found from the local Ostiak nomads: "I was lucky enough to see a beautiful thing at dawn: three Ostiaks, riding full-tilt, lassoed some deer, already marked, from their herd of several hundred while the dogs drove the deer towards them". After a week's journey of nearly five hundred miles, with the sleigh gliding "smoothly and in silence, like a boat on a crystal-clear lake", Trotskii reached the Urals, exchanged the deer-sled for a horse and soon reached the narrow-gauge railway which led to the Trans-Siberian Railway and freedom (Trotsky 1930: 146, 148, 152).

There was plenty of drama too during Trotskii's time in command of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, and this too is described with great relish. For Trotskii the fighting began at Sviiazhsk, the small town on the right bank of the river Volga where a bridge carries the railway to the left-bank and the regional capital Kazan'. Trotskii arrived there in early August 1918 after Kazan' had fallen to anti-Bolshevik forces, but Sviiazhsk and the bridge itself were still in Bolshevik hands. If the bridge were lost, then the road to Moscow would be open. Trot-

sksii summed things up succinctly: “the soil itself seemed infected with panic”. Shortly after his arrival an enemy airplane bombed his train. But this was Trotskii at his best. Commanders and commissars were shot for treason, a Red Airforce was organised and ‘bourgeois’ Kazan’ bombed and bombed again. And, despite nearly being outflanked by a surprise raid, the attack on Kazan’ began. Trotskii himself took part in an advance raid, which began well but “suddenly the darkness of the night was stripped naked by a flare”, his torpedo boat lost its steering mechanism when hit, and drifted onto a half-submerged barge: “the firing ceased altogether: it was as light as day and as silent as night”. The boat commander managed to restart the engines and steer by powering the port and starboard engines in turn and Trotskii escaped. Later, when Petrograd came under attack in summer 1919 “for the one and only time during the entire war I had to play the role of regimental commander”. As he led a charge “the bullets began their sweetish nauseating whistling”. It was a desperate move, but “necessary to win authority in the eyes of the soldiers”. The mood of those defending Petrograd changed and the tide turned. “Personal risk,” Trotskii

concluded, “was the unavoidable hazard on the road to victory” (Trotsky 1930: 312, 319, 338).

### *Trotskii’s Mission*

Trotskii is clear in his Foreword to *My Life* that “this book is not a dispassionate photograph of my life, but a component part of it” (Trotsky 1930: iii). While escaping from Siberia, or recounting his actions at the front, just like when recalling his childhood, Trotskii is dealing with uncontroversial issues, issues which were not “a component part” of the struggle in which he was engaged when writing his autobiography. Even here, however, he is coy about, if not silent on issues which might complicate his broader concern. Trotskii says next to nothing about his Jewishness in *My Life*. He explains that he had problems at his primary school because he did not know Yiddish and that prevented him from making friends, but that is about all (Trotsky 1930: 27-28). It is only by implication that the reader understands that, unlike most Jewish farmers in the region, Trotskii’s parents abandoned religious practice and preferred to speak in the local mixed Russian-Ukrainian dialect, or that Spentzer, despite being an Odessa Jew, was assimilated into

the liberal politics of the city. Trotskii continued this assimilationist path. He was opposed to the activities of the Jewish *Bund* within the Russian Empire, and disappointed New York Jewish socialists in early 1917 when he refused to have any serious contact with them. Only in his writings on the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 did he ever write in compassionate terms about the suffering of Jews, singling out the mistreatment of the Jewish community in Romania. Yet he was very conscious of his Jewishness. During the October Revolution he turned down Lenin's offer of the post of Commissar for Internal Affairs on the grounds that this might be offensive to many Russians, and he was furious in the power struggle of the 1920s when Stalin started to use anti-Semitic innuendos in the struggle against him (Rubenstein 2011: 61-67; Deutscher 1970: 325). *My Life*, however, was part and parcel of the political campaign Trotskii hoped to wage from emigration, a campaign which Trotskii felt had no place in it for what he saw as the secondary issue of his Jewish heritage. *My Life* was part of a campaign based on the notion that Stalin had betrayed the revolution, while Trotskii was its defender. As part of the greater struggle against Stalin and the Soviet bu-

reaucracy, Trotskii is clear that *My Life* should make no effort to be objective in the conventional sense: "describing, I also characterise and evaluate; narrating, I also defend myself, and more often attack", he states in the Foreword. This approach characterises all his discussion of the political events of the 1920s (Trotsky 1930: iii). In Trotskii's words, it is "mostly attack", and often his assertions are of questionable reliability.

Trotskii is keen to suggest that he should have been Lenin's heir, and that this was prevented by a combination of chance and Stalin's cunning. When in 1922 Lenin was recovering from his first stroke, Trotskii argues, he proposed that he and Trotskii, the two leaders of the October Revolution, should act together form "a bloc against bureaucracy" to oppose the then emerging leadership of Stalin, aided by Zinoviev and Kamenev. By the time of the Georgian Affair in March 1923, Lenin had wanted to expose Stalin and "the bureaucratic transformation of dictatorship" and all would have been well if Lenin's recovery had continued and he could have attended the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in April 1923 (Trotsky 1930: 376-381). Fate intervened, however, and Lenin's health worsened. Trotskii's chances of succeeding

to Lenin's mantle were finally scuppered when he was deliberately "deceived about the date" of Lenin's funeral and prevented from attending it (Trotsky 1930: 400). Trotskii's talk of "a bloc against bureaucracy" has been convincingly challenged by the Dutch historian Erik van Ree (van Ree 2001: 85-122),<sup>2</sup> while his claim about Stalin and the date of the funeral does not stand up to close scrutiny, since in fact he had ample time to return from Tbilisi to Moscow if that had been his priority (Swain 2006: 155).

Along side the 'attack' aimed at suggesting that Trotskii was Lenin's legitimate heir, *My Life* has silences aimed at reinforcing Trotskii's sense of victimhood. Trotskii gives some detail of the way he felt increasingly excluded from the Party leadership in 1924: he avoided "attendance at the ballet" and "drinking parties", and did not "fit in with this way of living". He kept his distance, he maintained, because he condemned "philistine gossip" and realised he was witness-

ing the first stage of a counter-revolution which demanded "mediocrities who cannot see further than their noses", led by "Stalin, the outstanding mediocrity of the Party" (Trotsky 1930: 397). What he does not tell the reader is what prompted his former comrades to cut him in this way. It was not simply because he was "rather pedantic and conservative in his habits", he had done much to antagonise his former comrades (Trotsky 1930: vi). After tense discussions in the Politburo in November and December 1923 about the best way of combating the Party's perceived isolation from the masses, Trotskii signed up to an agreed policy statement on 5 December; that agreement he promptly broke just three days later on 8 December (Swain 2006: 152). In such circumstances, it was not surprising that when he came into a room "groups engaged in conversation would stop when they saw me" (Trotsky 1930: 396). *My Life* is also silent about Trotskii's «Pravda» articles of November 1924, later reproduced as *The Lessons of October*, which took great pleasure in reminding readers that in October 1917 Zinoviev and Kamenev had opposed the Bolshevik plans to seize power. Trotskii was isolat-

<sup>2</sup> In his *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* Stephen Kotkin has reopened some of these issues, questioning whether Lenin was well enough to have written some of the documents collectively known as his Testament (Kotkin 2015). Nothing which Kotkin writes persuades me to reassess Van Ree's verdict on these matters.



ed in the mid 1920s for a good reason.

There is also an element of misrepresentation about events in 1925. Trotskii is quite right that he “made an honest attempt to work in harmony with the new arrangements” at this time. Trotskii had always wanted to take control of economic affairs, and his roles within the Supreme Council of the National Economy chairing the Concessions Committee, the Electro-Technical Board and the Scientific-Technical Board gave him extensive powers. As he noted, “not for nothing had I planned in my youth to take university courses in physics and mathematics”. What he does not make clear is that this meant he was part of the establishment in 1925, standing at Stalin’s side when, later in the year, Zinoviev and Kamenev came out against Lenin’s New Economic Policy because, they argued, excessive tax concessions were being made to the peasants. While it is true that Stalin eventually began to worry that Trotskii’s economic and technical initiatives were escaping Politburo oversight, it was simply not the case that “much of the creative activity of Stalin and his assistant Molotov was devoted to organising direct sabotage around me” (Trotsky 1930: 409). Trotskii was allowed

to plough his own furrow until April 1926 when, without sufficient consultation, funding for his favoured Dnieper Dam project was cut back. This attack on his own project convinced him that concessions were indeed being made to the peasantry, the Dnieper Dam was a concession to the peasantry too far, and so he belatedly joined Zinoviev and Kamenev’s opposition (Swain 2006: 159-64).

Understandably, given the nature of Trotskii’s mission, the final phase of Trotskii’s life in Russia is told completely through the mirror of this opposition activity, with no attempt at balance. The ‘betrayal’ of Stalin, with his support for the peasantry at home, was linked to betrayal abroad. In Britain, the Soviet Union had tried to work with the Trades Union Congress in fostering a broad united front, a policy which had worked well in preparing the 1926 General Strike, and had then gone disastrously wrong when that strike ended in capitulation. In spring 1927 in China, joint action with the Nationalists seemed to be helping the Chinese communists to make significant advances, until on 12 April the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai Shek turned on his communist supporters and massacred them. After staging demonstrations on the

Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution, the opposition prepared to meet its fate at the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in December 1927. Trotskii put it like this, convinced that he was playing the long game: “we went to meet the inevitable debacle, confident, however, that we were paving the way for the triumph of our ideas in a more distant future”. As he went into exile in Central Asia in January 1928, Trotskii was convinced that “the Lenin wing of the Party had been under a hail of blows ever since 1923” (Trotsky 1930: 418, 440).

#### *Silence on Pre-Revolutionary Relations with Lenin*

It was crucial for Trotskii that, in the struggle from exile in which *My Life* would play a part, Trotskii and Lenin were seen as acting together. His faction was ‘the Leninist wing of the Party’ just as he was Lenin’s true heir. Conversely, his opponents were keen to show that Trotskii was not Lenin’s best disciple, in fact he was hardly a disciple at all since in the pre-revolutionary years he had been one of Lenin’s most bitter critics. On the last occasion when Trotskii and Stalin met, in October 1927, Stalin concluded his attack on the ‘twaddle’ of Trotskii’s talk about

counter-revolution by pointing to a copy of the pamphlet *Our Political Tasks* which Trotskii had written in 1904. That pamphlet, he pointed out, was dedicated to the Menshevik leader Aksel’rod. He commented: “from Lenin to Aksel’rod – such is the organisational path that our opposition has travelled . . . Well, good riddance! Go to your ‘dear teacher Pavel Borisovich Aksel’rod’” (Swain 2006: 179). In *My Life* Trotskii does not ignore his disagreements with Lenin, but the details given are sparse and he is completely silent about what lay at their heart.

Although there were clashes in 1917 and again in 1920, the most bitter clash between Trotskii and Lenin came before the revolution, and here the veil is cast most fully. Trotskii asserts that the disagreement about the Party rules which took place at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1903 was a storm in a tea cup: “the difference was of no immediate and practical importance”, he insists, even though just a few lines later he noted that Lenin had thought it important enough to send his own brother as a personal emissary to Trotskii in the hope that he might change his mind and back Lenin. Later, he suggests that “my break with Lenin occurred on

what might be considered ‘moral’ or even personal grounds”; the crux of the matter was that Lenin wanted to remove Aksel’rod and Zasulich from the editorial board of «Iskra» and Trotskii was very fond of Zasulich, having lodged with her on his arrival in London as an émigré in 1902 (Trotsky 1930: 123-124). Recalling the events of autumn 1905 and spring 1906, Trotskii reminds readers that just a couple of years after the clash on the Party rules that Lenin accepted a Central Committee resolution which suggested that the split of 1903 had simply been “the result of the conditions of foreign exile” (Trotsky 1930: 141).

Trotskii was as opposed to Lenin after the 1905 revolution as he had been in the run up to it. The height of that opposition came in 1910-1912 when he set up the Vienna based newspaper «Pravda». What Trotskii has to say in his autobiography about this period of his life is completely disingenuous. He describes a violent clash between himself and Lenin which took place at a railway station while both were en route to Copenhagen for the 1910 Congress of the Socialist International. He gives the impression that if Lenin had not had a tooth ache, all would have been well. Then he suggests that the

issue which sparked their disagreement was what Trotskii had been writing about Bolshevik “expropriations”, the term used to describe Party sponsored bank raids. This was simply not the case. Trotskii is nearer the truth when he adds that his “article was not right, for it assumed that the Party would take shape by the union of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, cutting off the extremes, whereas in reality the Party was formed by the merciless war of the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks” (Trotsky 1930: 170). Here Trotskii, the ‘true’ Leninist living in exile, is correcting his youthful anti-Lenin views of 1910. Unity, he now concedes, should have been achieved through the struggle against Menshevism, rather than the reunification of Party factions. Between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Trotskii was indeed working for unity within the Party, and this was his particular focus in 1912 when he organised the Vienna Party Conference in the hope that Bolshevik “conciliators” would “induce Lenin to take part in a general conference” (Trotsky 1930: 175). The failure of this initiative, and the Bolsheviks’ appropriation of the title «Pravda» for their daily newspaper, prompted Trotskii to write to a vitriolic letter to the Duma dep-

uty Nikolai Chkheidze, a letter discovered in the Tsarist archives and used to discredit Trotskii in 1924.

Yet even Trotskii's references to reunification and the Vienna Party Conference, rather than merciless faction fighting, only gives a hint of the divide separating Lenin and Trotskii in the pre-revolutionary years. At the Second Party Congress 1903, Lenin offered a definition of party member which read: a member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party is one who accepts its programme and supports the Party both financially and by personal participation in one of its organisations". The Mensheviks, supported by Trotskii, changed the last few words to read: "and renders it personal assistance under the direction of one of its organisations". The difference was crucial. There were thousands of people who were not members of the underground who stored underground literature, distributed that literature, ran safe houses, stood look-out – were these people really not to have a say in Party affairs? Lenin's explanation as to why they should not be Party members centred on his understanding of class consciousness: workers, left to their own devices, could only acquire class consciousness 'from without', from

outside the normal class struggle.

For Lenin, class consciousness could only be acquired through the agency of the political party of the working class. Trotskii's experience of working with industrial workers in Odessa and Nikolaev, as limited as it was, had led him to the opposite conclusion, he was convinced that workers were quite capable of attaining political consciousness without the hectoring of a political party. In *Our Political Tasks* Trotskii was clear: "in the one case we have a party which *thinks for* the proletariat, which substitutes itself politically for it, and in the other we have a party which politically *educates* and *mobilises* the proletariat to exercise rational pressure on the will of all political groups and parties". Trotskii was clear, the working class could be guided, not led; the working class had to learn about revolution through its self-activity (Swain 2006: 17-18). And, in his view, much of that learning took place through the experience of the St. Petersburg Soviet in 1905 when workers established their own parliament.

The row between Trotskii and Lenin about leadership and consciousness became even more acute after the 1905 Revolution.

The Tsar had not been overthrown in 1905, but those revolutionary events had resulted in the Tsar granting an elected assembly, although not a democratically elected assembly, as well as temporary provisions on freedom of assembly, which allowed trade unions and other labour organisations some limited freedom of action. After 1905, there were even more labour activists in Russia who were outside the boundaries of Party membership if Lenin's vision were accepted. There were all those involved in trade unions, education societies, workers' clubs, workers' co-operatives – there was a legal labour movement operating in Russia, but its position within the Party was unclear. Lenin eventually conceded that those legal organisations verified by the underground committee could have a secondary status within the Party, but this failed to recognise that the Tsarist police had become so effective at penetrating the underground that the hierarchy of committees from the Central Committee downwards only existed on paper.<sup>3</sup> Trotsky's solution to this was to launch a new workers' newspaper that would ignore the fac-

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<sup>3</sup> These issues are discussed at length in Swain 1983.

tional debates which continued to wrack the underground and emigration, and focus instead on the practical work of labour activists in Russia. His Vienna-based «Pravda» made clear that it was “to serve not to lead” its readership. The Russian workers could recover their Soviet without the guidance of Lenin and others; as «Pravda»'s first issue stated, “the workers are taking the place of the intelligentsia”. Abroad the Social Democrats split and split again: beyond Bolsheviks and Mensheviks there were Recallist Bolsheviks, Conciliator Bolsheviks, Party Mensheviks and Liquidator Mensheviks; but by the spring of 1909 in Russia the Social Democrat Duma group, together with leading trade unionists, had put together a programme for social insurance which they presented to the legally held Congress of Factory Panel Doctors. Trotsky's «Pravda» could crow that summer: “there have never been so many conscious social democrats”. The self-organisation of the working class seemed to be paying dividends, as Trotsky's «Pravda» noted in autumn 1909: “Under the burial shroud of the old party, a new one is being formed; and our task, the task of all the living healthy elements of Social Democracy is to put all our forces to this end, to facili-

tate the birth and growth of the Social Democratic Party on this new healthy proletarian base” (Swain 2006: 37-38). When, after the Lena Gold Fields Massacre of April 1912 the Russian labour movement exploded with radicalism once more, Trotskii could feel that he had been vindicated – hence his bitterness that the Bolsheviks appropriated the title «Pravda» for the legal daily they launched in April 1912.

From Trotskii’s perspective, it was the work of his Vienna «Pravda», as much as Lenin’s «Pravda», which had revived the labour movement and mobilised the militant workers who overthrew the Tsar in February 1917. The labour activists who visited the leader of the Social Democrats in the Duma on the revolutionary strikes and demonstrations began made clear that this time their action would continue until the Tsar had gone (Swain 2017: 33). With only minimal guidance from Lenin, labour militants, mostly those active in the social insurance councils given legal recognition in 1912, had ended the autocracy and re-established the Soviet even as the Tsar fell. Trotskii considered himself vindicated: the self-organised working class had acted. What is more, Lenin seemed to be moving towards Trotskii’s position. Trotskii had

wanted a Soviet Government to be formed as early as 1905, now Lenin, to the surprise of many Bolsheviks, returned to Russia in April 1917 demanding the formation of a Soviet Government. For Trotskii, there was no purpose now in remembering the disagreements of the past. Although some of his comrades warned that there was a danger that Trotskii’s supporters would be swallowed up by the Bolshevik Party, Trotskii no longer cared: together the Bolsheviks and Trotskii campaigned against the ‘capitalist ministers’ in June and for a Soviet Government in July. Trotskii’s entry into the Bolshevik Party at the Sixth Party Congress was a mere formality (Swain 2006: 60).

#### *Silence on Disagreements with Lenin during the Revolution*

During the October Revolution itself there was a second disagreement between Trotskii and Lenin, another disagreement about which Trotskii preferred silence and obfuscation to frank discussion. When describing how, on the evening of 25 October, Lenin’s sister was distributing pillows so that Lenin and Trotskii could snatch some rest before the opening of the Second Congress of Soviets, Trotskii casually comments “only

now did Lenin become reconciled to the postponement of the uprising". This is an oblique reference to a short-lived but major disagreement between the two leaders, a disagreement which related to their long-standing differing attitudes to the role played by conscious workers and the Party of the working class. After the July Days, Trotskii and Lenin had been working closely together, but then "judging from some accidental and quite erroneous indications", Lenin concluded that Trotskii "was being too dilatory in the matter of an armed uprising", as Trotskii puts it (Trotsky 1930: 256, 266).

As Trotskii is keen to stress in *My Life* and elsewhere, the main disagreement within the Bolshevik Party in October 1917 was whether or not to stage an uprising. Zinov'ev and Kamenev were opposed to an uprising on the grounds that it was both risky and unnecessary. For them it was clear that the Kerenskii regime was disintegrating, so, all the Bolsheviks had to do was to wait until the Second Congress of Soviets gathered and call on it to form a Soviet Government. Kerenskii would then be put in a position where he had no choice but to resign and the newly formed Soviet Government would hold the ring until the Constituent Assembly met to

endorse it. Those Bolsheviks favouring an uprising argued that there was many a slip twixt cup and lip, that the 'petty bourgeois' parties – the Mensheviks and SRs – would wriggle and squirm, and that, just as in September 1917 when the Democratic Conference had ended up backing Kerenskii having first condemned him, so the vote at the Second Congress of Soviets would probably funk the issue of a Soviet Government. For them, it was clearly best to seize power first and present the Congress of Soviets with a *fait accompli* to be endorsed.

However, within the group favouring an uprising, there was a secondary debate: how should the uprising be organised? Lenin was clear, it should be the work of the Bolshevik Party using troops mobilised by its Military Organisation. This was the plan he outlined to the Central Committee on 10 October. The Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region was about to meet; there the Bolsheviks had the support of numerous army committees; these should be used to carry out a putsch in the name of the Party. Trotskii did not agree. He criticised Lenin for suggesting that the uprising should be the work of the Party and commented that "the difficult question of bringing its

preparation into accord with the Soviets” had not been mentioned by Lenin. Trotskii wanted the insurrection to be the work of the Soviet, and since the Soviet was “open and elective” and participated in by parties firmly opposed to the Bolsheviks, a Soviet led uprising would not be easy.

So, Trotskii argued for time, while Lenin insisted that an uprising was needed at once, well in advance of the opening of the Second Congress of Soviets. It was only on 12 October when the Soviet began to put shape on a proposed Military Revolutionary Committee that Trotskii began to see how the Soviet could become the instrument of the uprising. At the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region, Trotskii rallied those troops loyal to the Bolsheviks not to the idea of staging a coup but defending the Congress of Soviets. Thus, the uprising would take place not before the Congress of Soviets opened, but when Kerenskii tried to prevent it opening or moved to disperse it once it had opened. In the event, it was neither Lenin nor Trotskii who took the initiative in staging the uprising. Kerenskii, faced with the growing challenge of the Military Revolutionary Committee, decided to prosecute members of the Military

Revolutionary Committee and close down the Bolshevik press. It was not difficult to interpret this as an attack on the Soviet, the first move in an attempt to disperse the Second Congress of Soviets. The Bolsheviks were thus able to seize power through the Soviet’s Military Revolutionary Committee in the name of defending the Second Congress of Soviets (Swain 2006: 67-68, 72). This was not Lenin’s strategy, but Trotskii’s. However, the strategy worked and so Lenin’s disagreement with Trotskii was quickly forgotten.

Ironically, the last major disagreement between Trotskii and Lenin had the two leaders reverse their positions on consciousness and leadership. In 1920 Trotskii was both Commissar for War and Commissar for Transport. This combination led him to call for the increased militarisation of labour and the effective abolition of the trade unions as institutions no longer needed in a socialist state. Soon the surviving labour activists of the pre-revolutionary years, those whom Trotskii had represented for so long before the revolution, were after his blood. Lenin, on the other hand, argued that the trade unions still had a role to play under socialism, even if that role did need to be mediated through the Party.



Trotsky is honest when he notes: “one cannot deny that the so-called discussion of trade unions clouded our relationship for some time”, but he does not give the full story. He remembers it like this:

The working masses, who had gone through three years of civil war, were more and more disinclined to submit to the ways of military rule. With his unerring political instinct, Lenin sensed that the critical moment had arrived. Whereas I was trying to get an ever more intensive effort from the trade-unions, taking my stand on purely economic considerations on the basis of war communism, Lenin, guided by political considerations was moving toward an easing of military pressure. A discussion flared up in the Party, it was actually beside the point. (Trotsky 1930: 367)

It was far from “beside the point”. From September 1920 onwards Lenin turned against Trotsky. First he pushed the Party to declare that Trotsky’s abolition of the Railway Workers’ Union had been nothing more than a temporary expedi-

ent and would not set a precedent for the winding up of other trade unions; by November, Lenin was clear that all trade unions, even the Railway Workers’ Union, would be restored to their traditional functions. Lenin tried to keep the dispute within bounds, but Trotsky would not play ball. Lenin established a commission to examine the future role of the trade unions, on which Trotsky would serve; but Trotsky soon stormed out of the commission protesting that it was biased. The ‘discussion’ within the Party meant that elections to the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in early 1921 took place on competing platforms. At the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, where Trotsky was defeated, he behaved petulantly, declaring that Party rules had been abused to weaken his position and accusing Lenin of feigning neutrality while actually opposing him. Lenin was furious, commenting: “Try to stop Trotsky! How many divisions does one have to send against him” (Swain 2006: 133). Trotsky’s assertion that “I wound up all conferences with those who shared my view on the question of the trade unions while the congress was still in session” was not Lenin’s verdict (Trotsky 1930: 367). In the end it was Lenin, not Trotsky, who restored relations after the trade union

‘discussion’, persuading Trotskii that he should not carry out his threat of resignation (Swain 2006: 132-133). For the purposes of Trotskii’s struggle from Turkish exile, however, it was essential to play down the bitterness of this clash with Lenin. If the story that Trotskii was Lenin’s true heir were to hold water, the extent of the disagreement between them as the process of post-war reconstruction began could not be revealed.

### Conclusion

No autobiography is objective, and Trotskii is at least up front about how the story he tells of his life is part of his greater struggle against Stalin. This is fairly obvious when he is in ‘attack’ mode, and gives his version of the faction fights of the 1920s, but it is far less clear in the silences, especially the silences about Lenin. Yet these silences are essential to the greater purpose of *My Life*, essential if Trotskii is to cast himself successfully as Lenin’s true disciple and heir. Trotskii’s *My Life* is a work of political struggle, a work in which he can deliberately forget what made him tick as a revolutionary for two decades. Sokolovskaia, the mother of his two daughters, commented once that “in one thing he never

changes – that is his devotion to the revolution” (Swain 2006: 212). If the struggle to defeat Stalin and save the revolution meant consciously forgetting the past, it was a small price to pay. If Trotskii’s political purpose in writing *My Life* is kept in mind, his descriptive powers can be enjoyed to the full. And, when it is not political matters which are at hand, he can admit mistakes. Describing autumn 1919 when near Voronezh his military convoy was struggling through deep mud he recalled:

Once when we were fording a river, we got stuck mid stream. In a rage, I blamed everything on the low built machine, which my excellent chauffeur, an Estonian named Puvi, considered the very best machine in the world. He turned round to me, and, raising his cap, said in broken Russian: “I beg to state that the engineers never foresaw we should have to sail on water”. In spite of the difficulty of the moment, I felt like embracing him for the cold aptness of his irony (Trotsky 1930: 329)

If only Trotskii could have shown such humility when deal-

ing with his political opponents. Trotskii comments of others with whom he fell out: “revolution is a great devourer of men and character; it leads the brave to their destruction and destroys the souls of those who are less

hardy” (Trotsky 1930: 318). By denying his past in his memoirs, did Trotskii destroy his own soul?

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