

## ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ

### К СТОЛЕТИЮ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ В РОССИИ

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#### LEV TROTSKY AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

This article — the second part of a three-part series that reinterprets the “utopianism” of Russian revolutionaries, especially the Bolsheviks—focuses on the evolving views of Lev Trotsky. Part 1 described the basic theoretical approach: an alternative definition of the utopian imagination developed after 1917 in the work of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and others. In brief, this sees utopia as a critical analysis of conventional constructions of reality, time, and the possible: as a critical negation of that which merely *is* in the name of what should be, as a radical challenge to assumptions about what is possible and impossible in the present, as a vision of time and history as containing the possibility of an explosive “leap in the open air of history” (Benjamin). Utopian consciousness breaks into the normativized world of knowledge and expectations about reality and possibility in history to reveal the new and unexpected. This is utopia as radical epistemology, hermeneutics, and praxis. In this article, the focus is on Lev Trotsky (the previous article considered Alexandra Kollontai and the following concludes with Vladimir Mayakovsky), who, like all Marxists, denied he was a “utopian.” Although Trotsky’s ideological positions and political power evolved and shifted, we see a variety of expressions of a fundamental utopian imagination during the years from 1901 through 1921: his critique of pessimism, his optimism about the power of unleashed popular passions, his insistence that what was truly impossible was to imagine that the revolution could be “interrupted” (what he called “непрерывная революция” and later “перманентная революция”), his faith in the coming of world revolution, his conception of the historical place of violence for unleashing the possibilities of the new—for allowing an explosive “leap in the open air of history.” Refs 40.

*Keywords:* Lev Trotsky, the Russian revolution, utopianism, Russian revolutionaries.

**For citation:** Steinberg M. D. Lev Trotsky and the utopian imagination in the Russian revolution. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*, 2017, vol. 62, issue 4, pp. 664–673. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2017.401>

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## ЛЕВ ТРОЦКИЙ И УТОПИЧЕСКОЕ ВОООБРАЖЕНИЕ В РУССКОЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ

Эта статья — вторая часть серии из трех частей, в которой переосмысливается «утопизм» русских революционеров, особенно большевиков, фокусирующаяся на изменении взглядов Льва Троцкого. В первой части представлен базовый теоретический подход: альтернативное определение утопического воображения, разработанного после 1917 г. в работах Эрнста Блоха, Вальтера Беньямина, Теодора Адорно и др. Одним словом, в статьях серии утопия рассматривается как критический анализ обычных построений реальности, времени и возможного: критическое отрицание того, что просто уже *есть* во имя того, что должно быть, радикальный вызов предположениям о том, что возможно и невозможно в настоящем, видение времени и истории как содержащих возможность взрывного «прыжка на открытом воздухе истории» (Беньямин). Утопическое сознание проникает в регламентированный мир знаний и ожиданий в возможность раскрывать в истории новое и неожиданное. Это утопия как радикальная эпистемология, герменевтика и практика. В данной статье основное внимание уделяется Льву Троцкому (в предыдущей статье — Александре Коллонтай, а в заключительной будет рассмотрен Владимир Маяковский). Лев Троцкий, как и все марксисты, отрицал, что он «утопист». Несмотря на то что идеологические позиции и политическая власть Троцкого эволюционировали и изменялись, в период с 1901 по 1921 г. мы видим у него множество выражений фундаментального утопического воображения, в своей основе сугубо утопического: это критика пессимизма, оптимизм в отношении силы развязанных народных страстей, настойчивость в том, что поистине невозможно было представить, — революцию можно «прервать» (то, что он называл «непрерывной революцией», а затем «перманентной революцией»), его вера в грядущую мировую революцию и концепция исторического места насилия в высвобождении сил и возможностей нового для того самого обеспечения взрывного «прыжка на открытом воздухе истории». Библиогр. 40 назв.

*Ключевые слова:* Лев Троцкий, русская революция, утопизм, русские революционеры.

At first glance, no Bolshevik could seem more different from Kollontai than Lev Trotsky [Trotsky 1930, p. 1–159, 166–167; Trotsky 1970, p. 135, 142–143].<sup>1</sup> To be sure, in his youth he was inclined strongly toward the sort of dreamy idealism that he later eschewed. Isaac Deutscher observed that in becoming a socialist the young Lev Bronshtein “embraced a mood rather than an idea” [Deutscher 1954, p. 23]. This mood also led him initially to resist Marxism for its totalizing claims to scientific truth and its reduction of history to economic forces, leaving little place for human spirit, will, and action [Trotsky 1930, p. 1–122; Trotsky 1970, p. 99]. The idealism and heroism of populist socialism felt richer and truer. In the words of Max Eastman, an early biographer, Trotsky was too “full of fire and power and a sense of infinite impossibilities” to believe that the way to “mold future history” was to be a “cool and practical engineer” [Eastman 1925, p. 52–53].

In Siberian exile, the result of a modest effort in 1897 organize local workers in Nikolaev, he found work as a village correspondent and literary critic for the newspaper *The Eastern Review* (*Vostochnoe obozrenie*). His 1901 essay “On Optimism, Pessimism, the Twentieth Century, and Many Other Things” is typical of his intellectual and emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Biographies of Trotsky’s life range from sympathetic (especially [Deutscher 1954] to hostile (notably [Service 2009]), and from factually careful to error-ridden. See also [Thatcher 2003; Swain 2006; North 2010; Rubenstein, Trotsky 2013]. An incomplete edition of Trotsky’s works was published in the Soviet Union in the 1920 as Lev Trotskii [Trotsky 1925a]. These and other works are available on-line at <http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/trotsky/trotsky.htm>. A selection of works is also available at <https://www.marxists.org/russkij/trotsky/index.htm>. For on-line English translations, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/index.htm> (English). Quotations from Trotsky’s writings below are based on the original Russian text and cited without the author.

style at the time. At the age of twenty-one, Trotsky felt ready to take up all the big questions that interested the public at the start of a new century. Since pessimism was widespread in early twentieth-century Russia,<sup>2</sup> he reflected on the variety of its types. The most common was the “philistine pessimist” whose worldview is grounded in “experience that does not range beyond the shop counter, the office desk, and the double bed, who skeptically shakes his head and condemns the ‘idealistic dreamer’ with the pseudo-realistic conviction that ‘there is nothing new under the sun, that the world is nothing but eternal repetition of what has already been.’” A newer type, more characteristic of decadent modern times, was the “absolute pessimist” who looks at the present as “empty and dark” and the future as uncertain. Trotsky judged this to be a “pessimism that might create a philosopher or lyric poet but not a civic fighter.” Against both the narrow-minded philistine and the melancholy philosopher Trotsky offered a superior hybrid, a dialectical synthesis: the “pessimist of the present” and “optimist of the future.” Only this point of view could see all the darkness of the times in which one lives and feel the “passion, faith, and fighting spirit” required to “confidently knock at the gate of history.” To be sure, the new-born twentieth century seemed determined to “drive the optimist of the future into absolute pessimism and civic Nirvana. ‘Death to Utopia! Death to faith! Death to love! Death to hope!’ thunders the twentieth century with salvos of rifle fire and the roar of cannons. Surrender, you pathetic dreamer! Here I am, your long-awaited twentieth century, your ‘future.’” But the pessimist of the present and optimist of the future has the vision and boldness to answer no less loudly that “you are only the present.” Indeed, to see that the darkness of the present itself gives rise to “the forces creating the future. And what a future!... As long as I have breath, I will fight for the future, for that bright and radiant future when man, strong and beautiful, will master the drifting stream of history and direct it towards the boundless horizon of beauty, joy, and happiness!” [O pessimizme... 1901]<sup>3</sup>.

Along with such rhetorical perorations, which reflected the style of newspaper columns in Russia at the time as well as his own mood, Trotsky was concerned with the practical question of how exactly to “master the drifting stream of history.” So when the first contraband copies of the underground newspaper of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party, *The Spark* (*Iskra*) reached Trotsky in Siberia, along with Lenin’s pamphlet *What is to be Done?*, he found that his vague ideas about the need for a new type of revolutionary movement were already being developed by more experienced Russian activists in European exile. He escaped and made his way to western Europe to join this movement and Lenin in particular. Once there, he became a regular contributor to *Iskra*, though his florid rhetoric led some of the more senior Marxist leaders to doubt his seriousness and depth. Indeed, his biographer Deutscher concluded, “the distinctive mark of his early contributions to *The Spark* lies not so much in originality of ideas as in the force of the emotional current that runs through them.” Trotsky’s oratory, for which he would become famous in 1905 and 1917, was imbued even more with this “intensity of thought, imagination, emotion, and expression” [Deutscher 1954, p. 67, 69].

He displayed this to full effect at the second party congress in the summer of 1903. At the start of the congress, Trotsky was so reliable and vehement an ally of Lenin’s that he was nicknamed “Lenin’s cudgel” [Krupskaia 1933, p. 99]. But this alliance did not last long. Trotsky agreed with Lenin on the necessity of a centralized and disciplined party, but

<sup>2</sup> See my *Petersburg Fin De Siècle* [Steinberg 2011].

<sup>3</sup> See also [Deutscher 1954, p. 53–54]. I have used some of his translation.

he was troubled by Lenin's maneuvering to maximize his own control over the party, and soon shifted away from Lenin and his faction of "hards," as Lenin's faction was originally known. Trotsky's prophetic (and ironic) warnings in his 1904 pamphlet, *Our Political Tasks*, are well known, especially his condemnation of Lenin's plan to "substitute" the party organization and its "professional revolutionaries" for the movements of the working class and history. While his prediction of what this will lead to has become famous as foreseeing the rise of Stalin, it has also been argued that this pamphlet presages his own dramatic transformation into a coercive centralizer: "the party organization first 'substitutes' itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the party organization; and finally a 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee." This peril was rooted in Lenin's essential Jacobinism: "absolute faith in the metaphysical idea" of "truth," which only an elite of leaders can fully grasp, resting on "absolute distrust for living people." True revolutionary socialists, Trotsky insisted, embrace a more optimistic truth based not on abstract "revelation" from above but on faith in the common people and their struggle: "This is what deeply distinguishes us from the Jacobins. Our attitude towards the elemental social forces, and therefore towards the future, is one of revolutionary confidence" [Trotsky 1928, p. 127, 185–187]<sup>4</sup>.

These arguments evolved toward his theory of "permanent revolution," a vision more radically optimistic than even most Bolsheviks at the time were ready to accept: that proletarian power in Russia was not a distant goal after Russia overcame its backwardness but an immediate and practical task. He saw proof in the social rumblings stimulated by the Russo-Japanese war. At the end of 1904, Trotsky wrote about the fervent atmosphere surrounding the liberal "banquet campaign" of dinners, speeches, and resolutions calling on the government to grant greater civil liberties and political representation. In such an environment "the incredible becomes real, the impossible becomes believable." The problem was that Russian liberals would not be able to sustain this. They were too timid and hypocritical to challenge the tsarist system, to believe the impossible. They were afraid even to speak the word "constitution," worrying that the masses would not understand. But "behind the fear of the word was concealed the fear of the act: fear of struggle, of the masses, of revolution." Fear, he could have said, of the revolutionary "leap in the open air of history." This debilitating liberal pessimism made it necessary that "the people" themselves realize the democracy that bourgeois liberals wanted but dared not fight for.

Most Marxists, especially Trotsky's fellow Mensheviks, considered such an argument folly if not heresy: it was historically mistaken and politically harmful for the common people themselves to make the democratic revolution that was the destined task of the bourgeoisie and the liberal intelligentsia. But war made the impossible possible, Trotsky argued. He viewed the Russo-Japanese war in terms that would apply even more to the world war a decade later: a "dreadful monster, breathing blood and fire" accompanied by "the furies of crisis, unemployment, mobilization, hunger, and death." In atmosphere, a revolution "of the street," a general strike of urban workers for peace and a Constituent Assembly, became possible [Trotsky 1925a, p. 3–53]. This was a fair prediction of what would actually happen later in 1905 and much later, and more completely, in 1917. But in 1904 (or, for that matter, in the early months of 1917), this vision of how revolutions unfold seemed absurdly utopian even to most revolutionaries.

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<sup>4</sup> See [Deutscher 1954, p. 88–90].

During the 1905 revolution, in which Trotsky played a leading role, he did all he could to undermine the conventional belief among Marxists that the immediate task was a liberal “bourgeois democratic” revolution and thus their support for the bourgeois path of legality and reform. After the tsar’s manifesto on 6 August granted a consultative Duma, Trotsky chastised liberals for their inability to understand that democracy is “never achieved with the signing of a parchment. Such things take place on the streets. They are achieved through struggle” [Trotsky 1925a, p. 198]. During the October general strike, elected vice-chair of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, he reveled in the vitality of “the street,” with its disorderly intensity and uncontrollable possibility. Such a revolution, he would later write, “is attractive like a young, passionate woman with arms flung wide, showering avid kisses on you with hot, feverish lips.” He repeatedly interpreted these events in such emotional terms, and he judged such emotions to be a source of unprecedented possibility: “A tremendous, mysterious process was taking place in countless hearts: bonds of fear were being broken, the individual personality, having hardly had time to become conscious of itself, became dissolved in the mass, and the mass itself became dissolved in the revolutionary élan.... It rushed forward like the ocean tide whipped by a storm. Every day brought new strata of the population to their feet and gave birth to new possibilities. It was as though someone were stirring the social cauldron, right to its very bottom, with a gigantic spoon.... Everything disintegrated, everything turned to chaos. Yet at the same time within this chaos there arose a need for a new order, and elements of that order began to crystallize” [Trotsky 1971, p. 212]<sup>5</sup>.

If this revolution, as Lenin would later claim, was the “dress rehearsal for the revolution of 1917” [Trotsky 1930, pp. 1–213; Trotsky 1970, p. 186], Trotsky’s culminating turn on its stage was when he rose to address the court at his 1906 trial, accused along with other Soviet leaders of planning an armed uprising. Trotsky converted his position as defendant into that of prosecutor, charging the government with political illegitimacy. He grounded his case in moral law (though, as a Marxist, he would not have called it that). The tsarist regime, he explained, rules through violence when it feels strong and through concessions when it feels afraid. The street, by contrast, is inspired by “conscience,” “enthusiasm,” and a spirit of “moral regeneration.” How can the Soviet leadership be charged with planning, as the prosecutor charged, armed struggle against the existing “form of government” when there is no legitimate government. “For a long time past the government has not been supported by the nation but only by its military-police-Black Hundreds apparatus. What we have is not a national government but an automaton for mass murder.... If you tell me that the pogroms, the murders, the burnings, the rapes... are the form of government of the Russian Empire—then I will agree with the prosecution that... we were arming ourselves... against the form of government of the Russian Empire” [Trotsky 1971, p. 398–414].

Sitting in his prison cell, awaiting transport to Siberia, filled with the experiences of revolution, Trotsky wrote about the certainty of further revolution in Russia, which would continue until it brought the proletariat to power. This was not a utopian dream, he insisted, for “utopia” meant faith in “miracles” rather than in “facts,” a vision in contradiction to the flow of history [Trotsky 1990]. Trotsky offered a new realism that challenged how people understood reality. Although his comrades would view his jailhouse essays on the

<sup>5</sup> The Russian text is [Trotsky 1927]. This book was written in Vienna in 1908–1909 and first published in German.

coming revolution as a work of fantasy, Trotsky refused to accept conventional ideological assumptions about what was necessary and possible, especially the long-standing Marxist view that backward Russia required a bourgeois-democratic revolution before a proletarian-socialist one could succeed. For Trotsky, it was the “ultimate utopia” to think that the proletariat, once seizing power, “would be able to limit its mission, even if it wanted to, and create a republican democratic environment for the social supremacy of the bourgeoisie.” To think that workers could stop their revolution at this stage was “the worst kind of utopianism, the revolutionary utopianism of philistines” [Trotsky 1990, p. 101, 105–106]. Trotsky tried to cut through both the darkness of the present and ideological assumptions about history to “disclose ‘possibility’” in historical conditions like none seen before [Trotsky 1990, p. 84]. He acknowledged the huge challenges, not least the need to win support from Russian peasants and to expand the revolution to western Europe, for a Russian proletarian regime could not last long alone in a world of bourgeois enemies. But he insisted that history had created real conditions to realize something unexpected and new: the top-heavy power of the Russian autocracy, the weakness of the Russian middle classes, and the distinctive course of Russia’s industrialization, which created a large working class highly concentrated in big cities and big factories, were elements of Russian “backwardness” that paradoxically created unique opportunities for proletarian revolution. What was truly “unrealizable” and “impossible” [Trotsky 1990, p. 99] was to imagine that this revolution could be “interrupted” [Trotsky 1990, p. 104]<sup>6</sup>.

In the years of repression and retreat after 1905, Trotsky continued to express such arguments about revolution with an optimism and zeal that was striking at a time when most educated Russians were depressed about prospects for even a liberal bourgeois revolution. When war broke out in August 1914, Trotsky welcomed it as a door opening to global revolution. The spectacle of the major socialist leaders and parties in western Europe supporting their governments with as much patriotic enthusiasm as they had previously devoted to internationalism and antimilitarism shocked and depressed the remaining anti-war socialists. But Trotsky interpreted the disaster of war and the betrayal on the left optimistically. “The war of 1914,” he insisted, will lead history out of its “blind alley” by making clear to everyone the utter failure of the false hopes of the past, including capitalism, imperialism, the nation-state, liberalism, and reformist socialism. This death of illusions will make the most radical visions of a new world no longer utopian: nations will free themselves from empires, colonial peoples will awaken, and the nation-state itself will be abandoned as a relic of the old world of capitalism, oppression, and war. Rejecting the “despair” that so many “revolutionary Marxists” felt at the outbreak of war and the abandonment of internationalism by the socialist parties, Trotsky countered with visionary optimism. “The epoch we are entering will be our epoch.... We revolutionary socialists did not want the war. But we do not fear it.... Amidst this hellish music of death, we preserve our clarity of thought and unclouded vision, and we feel ourselves to be the only creative force of the future”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Although he would later call this vision a theory of “permanent revolution” (*permanentsnaia revoliutsiia*), in 1906 he used the term “uninterrupted revolution” (*nepreryvnaia revoliutsiia*). See the discussion of this work in [Knei-Paz 1978, pp. 64–87, 110–114, 120–144, 152–153].

<sup>7</sup> Collected into a pamphlet, *War and the International*, was published first in German in 1914 and in English in 1918 (as *The Bolsheviks and World Peace*). My quotations are translated from a reprint of the German edition [*Der Krieg und die Internationale* 1918, p. v, viii, 83–85]. See also [*The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology* 1964, p. 71–79].



When revolution broke out in Petrograd, Trotsky was living in the Bronx in New York City. Even with only sketchy details from the American press, he was sure this was the “Second Russian Revolution,” which would evolve uninterrupted into socialist revolution. “What is now happening in Russia,” he wrote in the émigré socialist newspaper *The New World* (*Novyi mir*) at the beginning of March 1917, “will enter history forever as one of its greatest events. Our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren will talk of these days as the beginning of a new epoch in human history.... The powerful avalanche of the revolution is in full swing and there is no human force that can stop it.” While most socialists saw only a liberal bourgeois revolution, Trotsky saw the beginning of permanent revolution. The Provisional Government is dreaming, he declared, when it tries to call “insurgent Russia” back to order. “The Russian revolution will not stop. As it develops, it will sweep off its path the bourgeois liberals just as it is now sweeping aside tsarist reaction.” And then it will “extend its hand to the proletariat of Germany and all Europe” [Trotsky 1924d, p. 5–7; Trotsky 1924a, p. 11]. As for critics who worried about the risk of gambling success on an uprising by the German proletariat, he questioned their appreciation of the new reality: “Really, we do not need to rack our brains over so implausible [*neveroiatnyi*] a supposition. The war has transformed the whole of Europe into a powder magazine of social revolution. The Russian proletariat is now throwing a flaming torch into that powder magazine” [Trotsky 1924b, p. 17–20]<sup>8</sup>.

By 1917, Trotsky was no longer as isolated as he had long been in these arguments. Most important, Lenin was saying much the same in March in a series of urgent “Letters from Afar” from Zurich to the party newspaper *Pravda* in Petrograd (which Kollontai personally carried to Petrograd on Lenin’s behalf) and then after his own arrival in the capital in April. Lenin tried to convince his hesitant comrades (Trotsky was still a Menshevik, though clearly far from the center of his party) that the February Revolution was the “historic moment” when the proletariat should prepare to take power into their own hands. He spoke, as he would often in the first months of Soviet power, of “miracles”: the “miracles of proletarian and popular heroism” that had made the February revolution must be turned into “miracles of proletarian and popular organization, to prepare for victory in the second stage of the revolution” [Lenin 1988a; Lenin 1988b, pp. 2, 116–131] Most Bolsheviks resisted these arguments, worrying that Lenin had lost touch with political reality while living in Europe or even that he had somehow succumbed to “Trotskyism.”

At mass meetings, at factory assemblies, at gatherings of sailors and soldiers, in the revived Petrograd Soviet, and in essays in the press, Trotsky insistently made the case for the revolution’s uninterrupted historic leap to socialism. On his first day back in Petrograd in May, on the podium of the soviet he had co-led in 1905, he declared, much to the annoyance of the majority of moderate Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, that the revolution had “opened a new epoch, an epoch of blood and iron, a struggle no longer of nation against nation, but of the class of the suffering and oppressed against the ruling classes.” A newspaper report of the meeting recorded “stormy applause.” “I think that your next step will be to transfer all power into the hands of the workers’ and soldiers’ soviets,” which will both “save Russia” and be the “prologue to the world revolution” [Trotsky 1917b, p. 3]. He acknowledged the risks. “History has given no guarantees to us, to revo-

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<sup>8</sup> See [Deutscher 1954, p. 245].

lutionary Russia, that we shall not be crushed, that our revolution will not be strangled by a coalition of world capital and that we will not be crucified by world imperialism.” But history also guaranteed, Trotsky believed, that this unfolding revolutionary process was impossible to stop [Trotsky 1924c, p. 131].

In the weeks before the October insurrection, Trotsky, recently freed from prison, seemed to be “speaking everywhere simultaneously”<sup>9</sup>, making the case for soviet power. It was more than a rhetorical flourish that he continually declared that “the time for words has passed”<sup>10</sup>. As we know, he was at the center of Bolshevik planning of an armed seizure of state power. And we know well the debates. Bolshevik dissenters warned that the party was too isolated, the masses too passive, the economic condition of the country too abysmal, and the European working class too far from revolution for a seizure of power in Russia by a minority proletarian party to lead to anything but catastrophe<sup>11</sup>. Things turned out less dire than skeptics feared, but this does not mean that Trotsky and other leaders of the insurrection were not risk-taking “illusionists,” as even his sympathetic biographer Deutscher recognized: they “needed a world-embracing hope to accomplish the world-shaking deed” [Deutscher 1954, p. 293]. The utopian principle of hope can produce daring actions, challenging the boundaries of the real and the possible. And yet, reality can exact a price for such daring. Trotsky was sure that their world-embracing hope and world-shaking deeds were in accord with the flow of history itself. Hence his famous dismissal of the Mensheviks and SRs who walked out of the soviet congress to protest the Bolshevik-led uprising: “your role is played out, go where you belong: to the trash heap of history.” Once in power, needing to defend soviet power against threats from all sides, world-embracing hope would justify even more disturbing deeds.

Coercion, violence, and “terror” were key elements of Trotsky’s job “arming the revolution” as Commissar of War and head of the Revolutionary Military Council, which was tasked with building and deploying a Red Army. While dashing between military fronts in his armored command train, Trotsky took time to write a lengthy pamphlet justifying revolutionary dictatorship and violence in response to a pamphlet by Karl Kautsky, who condemned the Bolshevik revolution for trying to impose on Russia the political will of a minority class, and predicted dire consequences: dictatorship, civil war, and terror, which will end not in socialism but in “barbarism.” Kautsky accused the Bolsheviks of utopianism: true socialism is not a “ready-made utopia” to be imposed through “political victory,” but must emerge out of a history of economic and social development [Kautsky 1920, quotation 92]. Trotsky turned the tables on Kautsky, arguing that his faith that democracy could be achieved under conditions of capitalism, imperialism, and bourgeois rule was the most “pitiful, reactionary utopia.” And it was “absolute utopianism” to believe that these could be overcome “imperceptibly and painlessly, without insurrections, armed conflicts, attempts at counterrevolution, and severe repression” [Trotsky 1921, p. 36, 64 (see also 13)]<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See [The Russian Revolution... 1984, p. 578].

<sup>10</sup> For example, in the resolution he wrote for the Petrograd garrison, 21 October 1917 [Trotsky 1917a, p. 12–13]. (Trotsky identified as author in Sochineniia, vol. 3, pt. 2).

<sup>11</sup> Views summarized by Lenin (Letter to Comrades (October 17, 1917). at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/17.htm>. See also [Kamenev 1917, p. 3].

<sup>12</sup> Pages cited here and below are from this first English translation, checked against the Russian original [Trotsky 1925b, p. 9–180].



In part, Trotsky emphasized necessity in the turn to violence and dictatorship. The desperate violence of the class enemy, backed by foreign imperialists, left Soviet power no choice. This was a struggle to survive. There is “in history no other way of breaking the class will of the enemy except by systematic and energetic use of violence.” And, he famously added, he “who aims at the end cannot reject the means.” Only a utopian would *not* be willing to use repression and violence in a “life-and-death” struggle to defend the revolution [Trotsky 1921, p. 22, 52, 55–58].

But there was more to these arguments than expediency and necessity. If war is an extension of politics, and class war, according to Marxism, its most historically important expression, then the dictatorship and violence of the proletariat is not only *necessary* to overcome the resistance of the bourgeoisie, but virtuous and just: it is a dictatorship to eradicate the sources of dictatorship, class struggle to end class itself, terror to end the causes of violence. Trotsky avoided explicit moral arguments, but they are implicit. When Kautsky complained that violence is a violation of the absolute “sacredness of human life,” Trotsky replied that “as long as human labor power, and consequently, life itself, remain articles of sale and purchase, of exploitation and robbery, the principle of the ‘sacredness of human life’ remains a shameful lie.... To make the individual sacred we must destroy the social order that crucifies him. And this problem can only be solved by blood and iron” [Trotsky 1921, p. 59–60].

As the civil war began, leaders of the Cheka, the chief arm of the “Red Terror,” similarly insisted on the humanism of terror: the point was to save human lives from the class that drained the “juices of life” from the people; Red violence was “cleansing,” an expression of how much “we value and love life as a sacred gift of nature.”<sup>13</sup> In older terms, familiar to Russia’s revolutionaries, these arguments echoed the religious millenarian vision of the world of evil and suffering transfigured through a bloody apocalypse and the secular variation on this theme as a revolution against injustice and oppression that must pass through a “final battle” when the “wretched of the earth” rise up and destroy the ruling class of “vultures” and “cannibals” (in the words of the nineteenth-century communist anthem, *The Internationale*). It is “utopian,” so many believed, to think there is any other way to redemption and freedom “on this sinful earth.” Indeed, they might have said, violence and terror (like war) was the explosive power need to “blast open the continuum of history,” to free humanity from normative reality, to overcome catastrophe, to allow humanity to leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. Or, at least, as Trotsky argued (precisely as Kollontai did), even if “we were to perish...our memory would pass from generation to generation and awaken posterity to a new struggle”<sup>14</sup>. Rattling the bars of necessity was itself a reminder of possibility.

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<sup>13</sup> Quotations from Cheka leaders in publications dated September and November 1918 [Ryan 2012, p. 114–115].

<sup>14</sup> Speech on 8 December 1917 [Deutscher 1954, p. 358].

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Received: 09.03.2017

Accepted: 20.11.2017