# The Long Strange Posthumous Life of Leon Trotsky

Historically the Socialist Party USA had two major splits. The first was after the Russian Revolution, when there was an international split in all socialist parties between those who accepted the leadership of Lenin's Third International and those who didn't. In the US, Debs, who had proclaimed himself "a Bolshevik from the tip of my head to the tips of my toes" -- reflecting the overwhelming international support for the Russian Revolution -- then led the Socialist Party in rejecting Lenin's "21 demands".

There followed the split which led to the formation of the Communist Party. The second major split - (actually two in almost one year) - was the right wing split in 1936 by the Social Democratic Federation which wanted to support Roosevelt, breaking with Norman Thomas, and the split by the Socialist Workers Party which, under James Cannon, had entered the Socialist Party and then in 1937 split, taking much of the youth of the Socialist Party with it.

By the 1960's (in fact even by 1951, when I joined the Socialist Party) both the Socialist and Communist Parties were shadows of the past, battered by various currents. The Communist Party was never able to build a mass base here after the Cold War began - Communism was seen not simply as "radical" but as "treasonous". The Socialist Party, in no small part because, fearful it might be accused of being communist, spent too little time on what it favored, and too much time making sure its skirts were clean. (There is nothing simple about this - the Communist Party always had internal dissent, and there was a serious left wing in the Socialist Party, which I joined when I came into the SP).

Thus when we leap forward to the "final split" in the SP in 1972 we are talking about midgets. Max Shachtman took out his people to form the Social Democrats USA (actually, he had the majority at the 1972 convention, so for a brief moment he ***was*** the SP - it is ironic that it is Shachtman's group which has since totally vanished). Michael Harrington finally broke with Shachtman and split to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee which morphed into today's Democratic Socialists of America. The remnants of the old Socialist Party, some on the left, some on the right, regrouped under Frank Zeidler in 1973 to form what is today the Socialist Party USA, and which is, pretty much, the legitimate heir to the party of Debs and Thomas. (It is under the banner of this group that I ran for President in 1980 and 2000).

In the real world nothing is static. The Socialist Party, which has about 1,000 members, has attracted newer members who are not aware of the history, and whose radicalism includes an admiration to Lenin and Trotsky. The SP is not anywhere near another split - only genuine Trotskyist groups can split when they have less than a 1,000 members. But I've been fascinated by this odd posthumous life of Trotsky, and want to reflect on it here.

There really aren't any Leninists running around - there are lots of people who belong to "Marxist/Leninist" groups, such as the Communist Party, but there are simply not a dozen different Marxist/Leninist groups in this country. There are large numbers of socialists who are not even aware that there was a Marxist tradition before Lenin, and independent of Lenin. There must be a few Stalinist groups, I am sure I could find them on Google, but not even the

Communist Party today counts as Stalinist. Stalin has almost no heirs. In fact, the interesting thing about Stalin is that almost no one wanted to duplicate his politics. The Japanese and Italian Communist Parties broke with Moscow very early, not long after Tito had taken Yugoslavia out of the "Communist Bloc". Mao (a man Stalin once thought might best be "eliminated") defied Stalin almost from the beginning. The Vietnamese were careful, in taking aid from both China and the Soviet Union, not to duplicate the Soviets in their own political patterns (there were never any purge trials in Vietnam to equal those in the Soviet Union). And Cuba stands almost in its own tradition, bending to Russia when it depended of Moscow's aid, but building on Cuba's own traditions.

It was as if everyone looked at Stalin and thought "there is a lot there we don't want to repeat". Even the Soviets, to the astonishment of the West, broke with their own "tradition" when Stalin died, and, after the murder of Beria, allowed a peaceful transfer of power to Khrushchev.

But Trotsky while dead, is still very much alive. Sometimes as a ghost on the far right - Max Shachtman became the first true neo-conservative, embracing the system. His followers took key positions in the Reagan Administration and in the right wing of the Democratic Party. Younger readers may find it hard to believe (I admit that even I do) that Shachtman, who went into the Communist Party in its early years, traveled to the Soviet Union, was a significant leader of the American Communist Party, ended his life supporting the US invasion of Cuba (the Bay of Pigs), the US invasion of Indochina, shifted from a position critical of Israel to one of fervent support of Israel. I knew Shachtman well, and while I didn't like the man, or trust him, I would never have thought he would have ended in the camp of the enemy.

The original Trotskyist movement in this country formed in the late 1920's, headed by James Cannon and Max Shachtman. It was authentically revolutionary, had an honorable tradition of work in the trade union movement. It reflected the international split, following Lenin's death, between Stalin, the General Secretary of the Soviet Party, and Trotsky, the brilliant, courageous military leader of the Red Armies. Stalin insisted that a world revolution was not in the cards history had dealt, that the only hope was to build "socialism in one country". Trotsky, by far the more revolutionary, and internationalist, argued that "socialism in one country" would become bureaucratic, militarized, and fatally "deformed". Both men were right. There was to be no world revolution. Germany, which had a powerful socialist movement, did not have a revolution and could not rescue the young Soviet Union. Trotsky was right, the Soviet Union became a police state. There was one crucial shift, however, which caused Trotsky to the end of his life to argue that the Soviet Union had to be defended in any conflict with the West - private property had been collectivized, and the old class had been destroyed. Shachtman split over the matter of the Soviet invasion of Finland, setting up what would become the Independent Socialist League, which lasted until it merged into the Socialist Party in 1958.

Some contemporary Trotskyist groups, such as the ISO (International Socialist Organization) represent what might be called Shachtman's radical positions of the 1950's. The official Trotskyist group, the Socialist Workers Party, long since became a cult, focused on support of Cuba largely ignoring its own Trotskyist past. There are other groups which owe a debt to Trotsky - Solidarity, while hardly an orthodox Trotskyist group, comes out of that background. *New Politics*, founded by Julius and Phyllis Jacobson (and a journal on which I was once a

member of the editorial board) had its origins in a kind of "left Shachtmanite" position. I felt I served as the "shabbas goy" on the editorial board, since I was primarily a pacifist, and had never been a Trotskyist. At one point - and perhaps the last intellectually significant split in the Trotskyist movement - Bert Cochran formed a new publication, the *American Socialist*, which had a brief useful life but could not be sustained. These groups have made real contributions to the American Left.

They made, for the most part, a very serious effort to uphold the best of the Russian Revolution, while being frank about the disaster of Stalin. Some of the Trotskyists did finally face the problems inherent in Leninism, the vanguard theory of change, the concept of democratic centralism, and the fact Trotsky himself was not really any nicer than Lenin. There are always apologies made for the violent suppression of the workers uprising at Kronstadt - and I wish the Trotskyists, and Leninists, some of whom are now in the Socialist Party, would realize that if one can justify mass murder because the situation demanded it, they should be much more hesitant in writing off the Socialist Parties in the West because they, too, made compromises. I guess my question to the Leninists is why are crimes and mistakes acceptable if committed by the followers of Lenin, but not if committed by the non-Communist left. (Thus far the best answer I've heard is that in the name of the revolution, murder, while regrettable, is defensible).

The Workers World Party, formed in 1956, when the Socialist Workers Party had a split over the Hungarian Revolution, (WWP supported the Soviet invasion of Hungary) became a thorn in the side of many of us, with its range of front groups - the International Action Center, ANSWER, etc. In due time WWP had a split of its own, the Party of Socialism and Liberation, which took ANSWER with it. WWP still exists.

If one had time and the inclination, the list of those who were in the Trotskyist movement, or touched by it, is truly remarkable. Dwight Macdonald's *Politics, Dissent* Magazine, and literally dozens of small Trotskyist groups. My own primary mentor, A. J. Muste, was briefly - very briefly - in the Trotskyist movement. The Trotskyist movement has had one great advantage over the Communists - with very few exceptions they never actually had power. And thus they could be pure. All those who hold state power will find that it forces compromises.

So much for this very too brief run down. I have read Trotsky, and Lenin, and Stalin, and a number of others from that period. I liked Lenin and still do - I just don't agree with him. My own path led me to Gandhi. I liked Trotsky a bit less, though I concede he was brilliant. Isaac Deutscher, in one of his three volumes on Trotsky, cites the case where, in one of the inner-party fights, Trotsky felt he had to make a temporary peace with Stalin. The price which Stalin exacted was that Trotsky withdraw his support from two of his own key allies. Which Trotsky did. Not surprisingly, his allies, once abandoned, sided with Stalin in the next round of in-fighting and helped seal Trotsky's fate.

All of which brings me to a deeply flawed film I rented from Netflix - *Exile in Buyukada*. Deeply flawed because while showing Trotsky's arrival in Turkey, where he spent the first period of his exile, the sound track, featuring a narration by the wonderful actor, Vanessa Redgrave, is "buried" under the music. There are occasional sub-titles, but essentially the film is only worth watching for the sense of that period. And it is to that sense that I now want to turn my attention,

(while, by pure chance, listening to a new recording of a Shostakovich work, featuring the Internationale).

Let's leave aside the manipulations of Shachtman, the betrayals of the Neocons, the chaos created by Workers World . . . and turn back to the events in the Soviet Union. That Trotsky would be expelled from the Communist Party and sent into exile was unthinkable. He had been essential to the revolution. He did not leave the young Soviet Union as a dissident - he left it as a believer in the revolution. He and his wife knew they faced death wherever they went, from Stalin's agents (who did finally murder him when he was in Mexico).

Trotsky had no allies within the socialist movement. He despised the socialist parties of the West. The problem was that he had no allies at all except for the opposition to Stalin which, in the Soviet Union, could not be expressed without risking certain death. In the West the Trotskyist movement was a small splinter in the side of the Communist movement, under steady ideological attack as "agents of the State". To support Trotsky was genuinely heroic - no one was going to pay you! You had no chance at career advancement. You had no allies in power anywhere in the world. The Communists would check out books by Trotsky from public libraries in order to destroy them (and I knew one Shachtmanite who checked out those same books from public libraries in order to save them from destruction - theft in the name of love).

The Communists held power in the Soviet Union. Their parties in Western Europe were strong. And strong even as far away as Indochina, and China, and Japan. So those of us who have basic disagreements with Trotsky - essentially the same disagreements we have with Lenin - should pay the history of Trotsky some respect. He was no a democrat. It has been said, by one of those in post-Soviet Russia, that if Trotsky had won the fight against Stalin the outcome would have been just as many executions - but with a far more literary flavor. The sadness of Trotsky's life is that once the internal fight in the Soviet Union had been decided, Trotsky was an heroic but lost figure. His followers in the US ended on the subversive list, were hounded from their jobs by the FBI.

But always and always, those who took Trotsky's side cannot help but look back and think what the Soviet Union might have been if only Stalin had lost that fight. I'm very much among those who feel that American socialists need to look to American history - not Russian or Chinese or Cuban history - to chart our course. But no one who has looked back at the early part of the 20th century can fail to be thrilled by that moment when it seemed as if the workers were actually in control of history. It was this painful memory Trotsky carried with him as he began the first of his exiles in Turkey.

May I suggest - though my Trotskyist and Leninist friends will not hear me - that the greatest honor one could pay to Leon Trotsky would be to let him rest with the honor he earned. And, as he broke with Stalin, so let us break with all undemocratic efforts at revolution, which would make human beings merely "means to the end". Humanity - each life - is an end in itself. As A.J. Muste said, "there is no way to peace - peace is the way". So too, revolution begins now, as we empower ourselves to think for our own time.

David McReynolds, 8/31/09