Leon Trotsky and 1905

1905 was not only a momentous year for Late-Imperial Russia, it also marked an important turning-point in Leon Trotsky's life. It was precisely in 1905 that, as Trotsky himself stated, he first advanced the theory of permanent revolution; a doctrine that was to be associated with him until his death and beyond. If this were not enough, 1905 was a notable event in Trotsky's life for other reasons. It offered him a first opportunity of participating in an actual revolutionary situation.

Trotsky acted as a revolutionary journalist and orator. He joined the St Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies and briefly, for one week, became one of three co-chairman of the Soviet's Executive Committee. He was then arrested, tried and convicted. During the trial of the Soviet's deputies, Trotsky made a characteristically flourishing denouncement of Tsarism from the witness stand. He did not meekly accept his punishment of internal exile, and soon he effected a successful escape, described in real boys' own adventure fashion in the essay 'There and Back'. Trotsky emerged from 1905, if only in his own writings, with a reputation as a man of action, as a revolutionary of great courage and daring. This essay will focus upon what Trotsky actually did in 1905. In particular, it will question whether the claims made on his own behalf, in his autobiography of the late-1920s, are true.

1905: Trotsky as Revolutionary

Trotsky returned to Russia from European exile in February 1905. He went first to Kiev and then after several weeks to St Petersburg, the centre and initial spark of the Revolution following Bloody Sunday. Trotsky soon considered St Petersburg to be too dangerous. Fearing arrest he spent the summer and early autumn in Finland, returning to the capital after the strike movement of October had taken off. It was in the relatively short period from mid-October to early-December, when he was arrested, that Tsar Nicholas II and the Tsarina in their coronation robes. It seemed that nothing could disturb the tranquillity and pomp of the Romanovs, but the events of 1905 gave them a severe jolt.
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Leon Trotsky (1879-1940). A Menshevik in 1905, he later joined the Bolsheviks and consigned his former faction to the ‘dustbin of history’.

Trotsky was to gain invaluable experience of revolution, working primarily as a revolutionary orator and journalist in the fire of events.

Trotsky’s journalism throughout 1905 outlined how the revolution should progress in general terms. In the pre-October period he penned articles for the Menshevik Spark, and for internal party bodies. In the heady days of press freedom of October to December Trotsky was a frequent contributor to several socialist newspapers, most notably the Soviet’s bulletin (10 issues of which were published), to the Menshevik Beginning and to the Russian Gazette, which he co-edited with A. Parvus.

Acting amongst the workers, Trotsky not only propagated the programme and slogans of revolutionary social democracy, he also became more intimately involved in the strike movement. In this instance his main efforts were exerted as a socialist member of the St Petersburg Soviet’s Executive Committee. It was in the Soviet that he could seek practical experience of revolution and genuine contact with actual workers. The Soviet of Workers’ Deputies was established in mid-October 1905 following the initiative of the (Menshevik) Petersburg Group. It called for a body of elected workers’ representatives, with one deputy for each 500 workers. The main task of the Soviet was to provide an organisation for workers to co-ordinate their efforts and action. The Soviet acquired a certain prominence, especially in October and November, before it was crushed by the arrest of its leading figures in early December 1905.

At its second meeting of 14 October the Soviet elected a deputy from the Union of Printing Workers, Georgiy Khrustalev-Nosar, as chairman. Khrustalev-Nosar served in this post until his arrest on 26 November. The Executive Committee was formed at the Soviet’s fourth gathering of 17 October. It consisted of 31 delegates; 22 worker deputies from the Soviet were joined by nine party representatives (three Bolshevik, three Menshevik and three Socialist-Revolutionaries). The party representatives were to enjoy a consultative voice only, in keeping with the determination of the Soviet to be a non-party body elected by, for and answerable to the workers. It is most likely that Trotsky was included in the Executive Committee as one of the Mensheviks. Despite having a consultative voice only, Trotsky worked for the Soviet with energy and passion, delivering speeches at its meetings and writing numerous proclamations.

Trotsky’s Influence
It is difficult to gauge the exact effects that Trotsky had upon the course of the 1905 revolution. One way of attempting to do so is to examine the most favourable view of a powerful and active Trotsky. This case was made by none other than Trotsky himself. Looking back at 1905 in his autobiography of the late-1920s, he made several claims on his own behalf. First, the papers he edited were far more interesting in content
Trotsky sees himself as having stood head and shoulders above his comrades.

and had a much greater circulation than any rival publication.

We have, of course, no way of knowing how many people were affected by Trotsky's journalism. It is unlikely that his words reached many peasants. He simply lacked connections with the villages, and there was no mass distribution of his appeals to the peasantry. Even in the capital, his main stomping-ground, the impression made by his journalistic endeavours may have been limited. After all, the time in which the revolutionary press appeared was very short, lasting from mid-November to early-December. There were 16 issues of *Beginning* from 13 November to 2 December. It was not until 15 November that the *Russian Gazette* fell into Trotsky's and Parvus's hands. The circulation of Trotsky's papers, at most 100,000 copies, was not so far ahead of his rivals' 80,000. Yet even these figures have to be qualified. The number printed says nothing about the numbers actually read. The police would seize newspapers without warning; over half of *New Life*'s 27 issues were confiscated, for instance. Furthermore, since these newspapers were collective endeavours, there is no way of knowing which author's articles the readership most preferred out of those that reached the public domain. Indeed, despite differences in emphasis and outlook, the contemporary reader may have been struck by the similarity of viewpoint across the revolutionary press.

The second and perhaps more important representation of Trotsky in *My Life* is not that as an effective propagandist, but as the real leader of the revolution in general and of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies in particular. Trotsky sees himself as having stood head and shoulders above his comrades. The leading Mensheviks were caught 'unawares' and thrown 'into confusion' by the pace of events. The Bolsheviks were sidelined by a negative attitude towards the Soviet, perceived as a rival to the party. Lenin had to overturn this attitude when he arrived in November but by then the reversal in Bolshevik thinking was too late for the faction to gain 'a leading position in the events of the first revolution'. As for Trotsky himself:

... there was not one from whom I could learn anything. On the contrary I had to assume the position of teacher myself ...

In October I plunged headlong into the gigantic whirlpool, which, in a personal sense, was the greatest test for my powers. Decisions had to be made under fire. I can't help noting that these decisions came to me quite obviously ... The events of 1905 revealed in me a revolutionary intuition ... I cannot, in the appreciation of the political situation as a whole and of its revolutionary perspectives, accuse myself of any serious errors of judgement.

In this picture Trotsky becomes the natural leader of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. Its chairman, Khrustalev-Nosar, is dismissed as an 'intermediate stage between Gapon and the Social Democracy'. The only figure that Trotsky allows to have any influence over the decisions of the Soviet is Lenin. Yet even Lenin, absent in Trotsky's account from its sessions, had to appear through intermediaries. It is clear, states Trotsky, that 'all the decisions of the Soviet, with the exception perhaps of a few that were accidental and unimportant, were shaped by me; I submitted them first to the Executive Committee, and then, in its name, I placed them before the Soviet.' Indeed, given his belief that the workers backed the Soviet 'to a man', based perhaps on his own ability to see the effects of events 'on the minds of the workers' for today and tomorrow, one could argue that Trotsky was the main actor of 1905. He was the revolution and the revolution was he.

There is evidence that suggests that Trotsky's role in the Soviet was far from minor, and yet he never enjoyed the influence he claimed for himself in *My Life*. The editorial notes to his collected works produced in the early-1920s state that Trotsky had a particular influence over only two of the Soviet's many resolutions. Elsewhere, several memoirs recall that the Soviet was mindful of its independence. It did not desire politicals to speak instead of the workers. It was precisely for this reason that the politicals were given a consultative voice only. The Soviet guarded its independence not only from politicals but from its own Executive Committee, in which workers also predominated. The Executive Committee could not issue resolutions in the Soviet's name, but had to take them to the Soviet for approval. The workers were quite capable of forming their own demands and resolving their own dilemmas. It was often local trade unions or factories that took initiatives, the Soviet then reacting to events by offering its support.

Writing in 1906, Trotsky presented a far more modest, and probably more accurate, account of the role of politicals in the Soviet:

On all the important questions - strikes, the struggle for the 8-hour working day, the arming of the workers - the initiative came not from the Soviet, but from the more advanced factories. Meetings of worker-electors passed resolutions that were then taken by deputies to the Soviet. In this way the organisation of the Soviet was, factually and formally, an organisation of the overwhelming majority of St Petersburg's workers.

Representatives of the party did not enjoy either in the Soviet or in the Executive Committee a deciding vote; they participated in debates but not in the voting. The Soviet was organised by the principle of representation of workers...
according to factory and profession, not according to party groups. Party representatives could serve the Soviet by their political experience and knowledge, but they could not have a deciding vote breaking the principle of the workers’ self-representation.

In the autobiography Trotsky is also too dismissive of the part played by other politicals. One cannot deny that Trotsky was a prominent political, one of nine in the Executive Committee. However, it is unfair to represent other members of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) as sidelined by a dismissive attitude to the Soviet (Bolsheviks) or simply confused (Mensheviks). Indeed, in a letter of 1922 to the Institute of Party History Trotsky claimed that the joint activity of all factions in the Soviet generated a real sense of party unity. In this context he reveals that resolutions produced in the heat of the moment and presented to the Executive Committee were beforehand elaborated by a group of leading Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Resolutions he subsequently claimed as his own could actually have been jointly authored.

Even in the autobiography Trotsky admits that it was the Mensheviks, not he, who first implemented the idea of calling for a Soviet. Yes, we are told, it was a close-run thing. Trotsky was robbed of the distinction of being the Soviet’s founder only by a whisker. He had headed for the capital with the intention of forming a Soviet, only to discover one already in existence. But, even so, the Mensheviks were obviously far from ‘confused’. This may be the only instance in which Trotsky admitted that he developed an idea simultaneously and independently of anybody other than Lenin. But, to reiterate, in the Soviet Trotsky worked as part of a team. It was thus fitting that following the arrest of the first chairman, he was elected as co-chair along with two other representatives. This arrangement was to last for just seven days and it occurred when the Soviet’s influence was on the wane. There were to be two meetings of the Executive Committee in that week and none of the full Soviet. It was at the second gathering of the Executive Committee that Trotsky, along with others, was arrested as a member, not the leader, of the Soviet.

If the Soviet had any public face in 1905 it was that of Khrustalev-Nosar. In the memoirs of the Prime Minister of the day, Count Witte, Trotsky does not merit a mention. Witte can only call to mind Khrustalev-Nosar as first.

The events of ‘Bloody Sunday’, 22 January 1905, when guards at the Winter Palace fired on unarmed workers led by Father Gapon (inset), killing hundreds.
It would be a great disservice to the workers and to the Soviet to overemphasise Trotsky's role, just as it would be unfair to Trotsky to write him out of the history of 1905.

elected leader of the Soviet. Khrustalev-Nosar’s name probably stuck in Witte’s memory because of two meetings in which this man led a delegation to the Prime Minister. Witte’s memory may have altered, of course, had he lived to write his memoirs after the Bolshevik revolution instead of completing them in 1912, but this only confirms the limited impression Trotsky made at the time on the popular consciousness. Following Khrustalev-Nosar’s arrest at the end of November, the factories abounded with resolutions calling for his release. It was unfair of Trotsky subsequently to belittle his role. In 1906 Khrustalev-Nosar wrote an extensive and useful essay on the history of the Soviet. In 1909 Trotsky was happy to write about the Soviet’s chairman in a much more balanced fashion:

A man of practical ability and resourcefulness, an energetic and skilful chairman although only a mediocre orator ... Khrustalev’s lack of political allegiance facilitated the Soviet’s relations with the non-proletarian world and especially with the organisations of the intelligentsia, from which it received considerable material assistance.

The problem with My Life is that it was produced after a public spat between Trotsky and Khrustalev-Nosar in 1913, and after Khrustalev-Nosar had been shot for counter-Soviet activities in 1918. This merely helped Trotsky focus on the polemical purpose of his autobiography, rather than present an honest evaluation of 1905.

Influences on Trotsky

Yet if Trotsky did not have as great an impact upon 1905 as his autobiography subsequently made out, 1905 did have a great impact upon him. In 1905 he was able to witness the workers acting spontaneously and independently. He also saw Bolsheviks and Mensheviks working together under the pressure of the workers and of the revolution. This may have boosted his hopes for unity within the RSDLP and helped to vindicate his non-factional stance. Although the workers did not attain victory in 1905, and although the unity in the RSDLP was short-lived, Trotsky had hope for the future. 1905 also cements Trotsky’s reputation as a revolutionary, even if to a limited audience. But, whatever criticisms were laid at his door and however his role may have been exaggerated, henceforth Trotsky would be guaranteed a hearing amongst social democrats, even if he was not sufficiently powerful to be an acknowledged general leader. He certainly emerged from 1905 with an identity of his own and a proven capacity for independent action.

Conclusion

It is tempting to examine 1905 for the precedent it set for the future, most notably the revolution of 1917. This is precisely what Trotsky attempted in his autobiography. Here 1905 is presented as a dress rehearsal for 1917. 1917 was indeed to repeat 1905 in many instances. The confusion and failure of the Mensheviks, the wavering of the Bolsheviks without Lenin, ultimately that only Lenin and Trotsky were capable of true and decisive revolutionary leadership – these were facts made apparent from Russia’s first revolution. It may be true that the experience of 1905 was remembered by Trotsky in 1917. He may have felt on familiar ground, a sense of ‘here we go again’. The task of seizing power would relegate previous differences to insignificance. Such thoughts may have aided his joining the Bolsheviks after only so recently engaging in long and bitter polemics with that very faction.

Yet none of this was evident in 1905. From reading the sources produced at the time it emerges that Trotsky worked as a revolutionary socialist within organisations that he had no clear control over. He was happy to serve the cause and made his own valuable contributions, chiefly as orator and propagandist. However, what is more interesting than the fate of one man is how the revolution’s goals were driven not so much by socialist intellectuals, but by workers fighting for their economic and political rights. In this struggle the workers developed their own agendas and decisions. They guarded their independence carefully. Trotsky may have celebrated the workers’ radicalism as confirmation of permanent revolution, that a revolution in Russia would be led by the workers and for socialism. For the most part, though, he seems to have articulated concerns common to both workers and intellectuals at the time.

The 50 days of the Soviet’s existence coincided with Trotsky’s presence in St Petersburg. He neither founded nor led the Soviet but did what he could. It would be a great disservice to the workers and to the Soviet to overemphasise Trotsky’s role, just as it would be unfair to Trotsky to write him out of the history of 1905.

Further Reading

L. Trotsky, 1905 (Moscow, 1922)
L. Trotsky, My Life (Harmondsworth, 1975)
S. Witte, The Memoirs of Count Witte (London, 1921)

Issues to Debate

- What picture of himself during the 1905 revolution did Trotsky paint in his autobiography?
- In what ways was this picture misleading?
- What was the significance of Trotsky for 1905, and of 1905 for Trotsky?

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