

A Symposium on Leon Trotsky's THE REVOLUTION BETRAYED: Fifty Years Later

Special Editor: Susan L. Woodward

Editor's Preface

Susan L. Woodward
Yale University

The fate of classics is more often to be possessed than read. These five articles are the product of an inspiration by John Burkett to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Trotsky's classic analysis of Stalinism with a re-reading, or first reading, and then a sharing of the experience in colloquium before the eighteenth national convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in November 1986. This act of excited discovery and rediscovery mixed with daring to do close critical analysis of what had since become gospel for many was enhanced by awareness that in Moscow these very days open entertainment of the proposition that perhaps NEP had not yet lived out its usefulness to socialism had made such a reconsideration more than academic.

Although *The Revolution Betrayed* is usually read as a stinging indictment of the economic and political policies of his ultimate opponent, the changes in Soviet state and society that followed, and the usurpation of the revolution by the bureaucracy, all five authors, each working independently, chose instead to interpret it as a set of questions and propositions about the path of socialist development in general, including the alternative embodied in the NEP. Evidence is strong, furthermore, that they did so not to skirt its polemic or to ride the current bandwagon but to restore proper weight to the debate it raises.

Thus, John Burkett takes Trotsky's paradox on socialization in conditions of underdevelopment, and its twin theories about economic growth and social change, as worthy of serious test--and finds half the prediction to be demonstrable (with intriguing evidence about the current climate in the USSR). In similar vein, Judith Shapiro argues that as Trotsky's propositions about the proper economic policies of the transition were based on his critique of what did happen, his data should be put to that test. For Richard Day, the path of economic and socialist development is the product of human choice, hence Trotsky's critique of bureaucracy; thus the treatise should be read ultimately as an effort to provide a political theory of the socialist transition, an effort Day finds has deep roots in Hegel. Alec Nove and Deborah Milenkovitch, in different ways, turn our attention to Trotsky's insistence on prices and the market during the transition as means to both balanced growth and democratic control, a position they argue has been distorted or overlooked. All five rightly emphasize the interrelatedness of Trotsky's "economics" and "politics" even when they disagree on where his strengths and weaknesses lay.

One cannot come away from this retrospective without seeing how much more influence Trotsky had on actual socialist states than is sometimes recognized (or that it is usually attributed more to Bukharin than it should be). For example, the Yugoslavs, above all the system architects, Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič, aimed at a path by 1946, or earlier, that can only be described as Trotskyist: rapid but balanced growth through rising labor productivity, especially in light industry, economic links between town and village, worker and income, and a stable currency; gradual and voluntary socialization of agriculture; control of the plan from below, especially for consumption, by both market demand and democratic participation; and attack on bureaucracy combined with reliance on subjective factors (above all the party). That they saw this as a total strategy offers further evidence of the position taken by Alec Nove and Deborah Milenkovitch while it makes even more significant Judith Shapiro's focus on Trotsky's treatment of labor productivity and his peculiar silence on unemployment. Although the quarrel of 1948 was complex, Stalin knew whereof he spoke when he charged the Yugoslavs accordingly just as Imre Nagy, for example, did not choose to label his program *The New Course* without regard for its meaning and Milovan Djilas was not acting the naif when he revived the concept of the new class.

But it is not my intention to prolong the centuries-old tradition in east-central Europe of memory literature. As Day, Nove, and Shapiro rightly insist, serious errors of evaluation and of policy result if one fossilizes positions taken at moments of a political debate and under particular economic conditions rather than remember the dialectic of change (whatever its motive forces). At the same time, it is just this that seems most apparent with a half-century of hindsight: the extent to which Trotsky succeeded rather than failed by shaping the discourse that came after, both in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe. It was he who gave voice to the alternative tradition: the questions that get asked, the lines of debate, the *language* of the critique from within and analysis from without. Whether this takes the form of an entire path, as in the Yugoslav case, of intellectuals' critiques written to influence policy change and rally political forces in Eastern Europe or China,¹ or of partisan conflict, and whether this power over perception draws from its place in an older tradition or not, it makes clear the importance of continuing to expose his arguments and categories to check "from below."

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1. Two very different modes of analysis demonstrate this common set of assumptions--Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London: New Left Books, 1978) and Ivan Szelenyi's *Urban Inequalities under State Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); the legacy is also revealed in the current discussions about civil society and state-society relations by the Budapest school (e.g., Gyorgy Bence but also Andrew Arato) and Solidarity (e.g., Jacek Kuron but also George Kolankiewicz) and in the political debates about economic reform.