

A REVIEW

Trotsky: Literature, Art and The Russian Revolution

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Literature and Revolution

By Leon Trotsky

Haymarket Books, 2004

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Available from <http://www.resistancebooks.com>

The eight chapters that make up Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* were drafted in 1922 and 1923 - a period of severe economic, social and political turmoil for the Bolshevik-led Soviet Union. Although the civil war of 1918-1921 had resulted in defeat for the pro-Tsarist White Army, the price of victory was extremely high for the young workers' state.

Major population centres, including Moscow and St Petersburg, were severely depopulated and the urban working class displaced. Industrial production had plummeted and tens of thousands of the most dedicated worker-militants had died during the civil war defending the Russian Revolution. The revolution was increasingly isolated and surrounded by hostile powers after the defeat of revolutionary upsurges in other European countries.

Moreover, the Bolshevik Party itself was showing early signs of an impending bureaucratic degeneration. The death of party leader Vladimir Lenin in 1924 enabled Joseph Stalin to consolidate his power base at the expense of Leon Trotsky and other genuine revolutionists.

Given these circumstances it may appear surprising that Trotsky, the organiser of the victorious Red Army and subsequent leader of the opposition to Stalinism within the Bolshevik Party, would devote his time to a Marxist exposition on art, literature and culture.

But *Literature and Revolution* underscores two important political points quite relevant to the challenges facing the Russian Revolution in the early 1920s. On one hand the essays reflect the high importance Marxists place on cultural development for the socialist transformation of society. Trotsky's book also contains a brilliant polemic against the stifling of artistic creativity by elitist literary circles and the dead hand of the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy. These two central concerns ensure that *Literature and Revolution* has a lasting significance.

Trotsky emphasises from the beginning of his book that material and economic considerations rightfully took greater priority over artistic concerns for the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. If the Russian workers and peasants proved unable to maintain state power in the face of foreign imperialist aggression or failed to rebuild an economy shattered by years of war and famine then the revolution itself was headed for certain defeat.

Trotsky saw immense possibilities for artistic and cultural advances in a society free from all forms of exploitation and oppression. He welcomed the new attempts at experimental art, poetry, literature

and architecture that flowered in the major Russian cities after the revolution - although he also criticised some of these trends from an aesthetic point of view. His optimism about the potential of art in the future was complemented by a nuanced appreciation of the social role art has played throughout human history.

Trotsky's Marxist understanding of the class basis of art didn't mean that he thought that art could or should be mechanically hitched to political concerns. He strongly rejected the idea that artistic expression could be directed by political decrees or that art bears a direct relationship to political and social developments.

While he held that it would be "silly, absurd, stupid to the highest degree, to pretend that art will remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch", he warned that first and foremost "art develops by its own laws - the laws of art".

Far from wishing to impose any strict dogmas upon art in the Soviet Union Trotsky knew well that "the plough of the new art is not limited to numbered strips. On the contrary it must plough the entire field in all directions."

These ideas concerning the relationship between art, culture and revolution brought Trotsky into conflict with dogmatic trends of artistic criticism that began to surface among sections of the left-wing intelligentsia and the Russian Communist Party. The rise of these ideas coincided with the growing bureaucratisation of the party officialdom, who were gradually freeing themselves from all forms of public control and growing more accustomed to imposing their dictates on all spheres of Soviet life - including art and literature.

Prominent artistic groups (the most famous being Proletkult) had begun to proclaim the advent of "proletarian art", "proletarian science" and "proletarian literature".

Proletkult argued that, like the class-based societies of the past (e.g. capitalism, feudalism, slavery etc.), the revolutionary workers' state in Russia would inaugurate a distinctive working-class, or proletarian, culture and art of its own. All the art inherited from the past was to be ignored or swept away as the art of decadent exploiting classes.

Trotsky rejected as ridiculous and dangerous Proletkult's demand that Marxists renounce the artistic achievements of previous generations. The working class cannot "reject" bourgeois culture because it was never beholden to it in the first place, he responded. Rather, working people need the opportunity to assimilate and thereby "conquer" the best examples of art and literature of the past in order to transcend it in the future.

Furthermore he attacked the entire concept of "proletarian" culture as mistaken and nonsensical. The working class will never be able to produce its own distinctive class culture because "the proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture". The more firmly the democratic workers' state is established, the more the danger of counter-revolution or military invasion recedes, the more the economy is brought under popular control and planning, then the more the working class itself "will be dissolved into a socialist community [and] free itself from class characteristics and thus cease to be a proletariat".

The polemic against "proletarian culture" had a strong political significance at the time. It was an early shot fired in the battle against the encroaching Stalinist threat to the Russian Revolution. By 1934, when the Stalinisation of the Bolshevik Party was complete, the cultural theories of Proletkult were canonised in the rigid state doctrine of Socialist Realism. This functioned to bring all Soviet artistic expression under the control of the bureaucracy. Artists who renounced Socialist Realism

were mercilessly persecuted. The creative and experimental art that flourished in Russia in the wake of the 1917 Revolution was throttled and suffocated.

How antithetical the policy of Socialist Realism is to a genuine Marxist approach to art and literature is strikingly apparent in *Literature and Revolution*. Trotsky champions “complete self-determination in the field of art”. He also argues that a revolutionary party holding state power has no place whatsoever in giving official support to any artistic school or trend over another. The Bolsheviks needed to guarantee the material conditions that would enable a new art to flourish. But art was not a field where the Bolsheviks were called upon to lead, let alone dictate from above, he stressed.

Trotsky’s tremendous optimism about the cultural and social advances possible under socialism gives his defence of artistic freedom added power. A new artistic culture will develop by its own mechanisms when the evils of poverty, exploitation and oppression recede into history. In these conditions “the forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”

P.S.

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