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The Prophet Perverted - Netflix's "Trotsky" miniseries, antisemitism and nationalism

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Netflix's Trotsky miniseries demonizes its namesake with antisemitic themes and rank nationalism.

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Since its December 2018 debut on Netflix, historians have cataloged the inaccuracies of the Russian miniseries *Trotsky* [1]. This is unsurprising — the filmmakers themselves have admitted that their aim was never to create a faithful depiction of the Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, to begin with.

But more interesting than these inaccuracies is the political point of making such a series today.

One hundred years after the October Revolution, and twenty-seven years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia sees itself as the counterweight to the Western world order, especially its major pillars, the European Union and NATO. Of course, this nationalistic ethos can be found well before the fall of communism and the rise of the current regime. Russian nationalism was a primary tool of Soviet premier Joseph Stalin.

His campaign of "Socialism in One Country" aimed at consolidating power on behalf of an entrenched Soviet bureaucracy. For Stalin, it was far safer to build a tame "socialism" at home than to risk unleashing the power of a mobilized working class around the world. This conservatism was the rejection of the original, Bolshevik program of international socialism, embodied by Leon Trotsky and his "Left Opposition" to Stalin.

In Stalin's Russia, the campaign against Trotsky, an ethnic Jew, carried with it overtones of antisemitism. Now, a generation after the fall of the Soviet Union, Stalin has been rehabilitated as something of a national martyr, the embodiment of a glorious, muscular, and imperial past. Trotsky remains mostly an ignored figure. Coming amid the rebirth of adulation for Stalin, the Netflix miniseries ends the contemporary silence on Trotsky — by maligning him.

Demonizing Trotsky

In the series, Leon Trotsky is repeatedly cast as neurotic, effeminate, egotistical, and full of contempt for common folk.

In two separate episodes, this leader of the Red Army is depicted as not knowing how to shoot a gun. He constantly fusses over his clothing and the need to maintain “revolutionary aesthetics” when made fun of by the other Bolsheviks for his affected style.

In the final episode, shortly before being killed, Trotsky bizarrely stares into the mirror, professing to himself, “I love you. I’ve always loved you and only you,” even as his wife sat nearby on the bed.

He is depicted throughout the series as a compulsive womanizer. Episode one begins with a violent, pornographic depiction of him sexually dominating Larissa Reissner, who is portrayed less as the commissar that she was and far more like a jazz-era flapper. In his exile in Mexico, the relationship between Trotsky and artist Frida Kahlo is cast as disturbingly masochistic, where both she and Trotsky’s wife, Natalia Sedova, are playthings for his sexual impulses and childish vanity.

Even the outsized armored train, which punctuates each crucial scene of the series, is a ham-fisted allegory for the sexual penetration of Mother Russia. Trotsky explicitly compares the Russian Revolution itself to insemination, and the nation as a mad woman who must be dominated.

The whole show carries the tone of a stern Christian admonition. Trotsky’s bohemian sexual affairs in Mexico thoroughly disturb Frank Jacson, Trotsky’s soon-to-be assassin and present companion. Jacson, at once, is a professed admirer of Stalin, and at the same time, an implacable conservative moralizer. While Jacson apparently has no scruples about caving in the head of an unarmed, elderly Trotsky with an icepick, he can’t bear the thought of sexual promiscuity.

Lest the Christian message be lost to the viewer, they are conveniently reminded at the start of each episode: In a recurring flashback to the revolution, we see a graphic sequence of the front of Trotsky’s war train, at the center of which is a bloody cross superimposed on the iconic red star. This is no sympathetic allusion to Trotsky’s own martyrdom by Stalin’s assassin. The final scene of the series makes this clear, wherein a Biblical quotation directly attacks Trotsky’s legacy: “The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble.” (Proverbs 4:19)

In another crucial scene from the revolution, we see Trotsky’s men desecrating a Christian burial ground. They are removing wooden crosses to be used as fuel for the armored train. This is followed by the gratuitous massacre of the outraged mourners in that snowy graveyard. In all, Trotsky is portrayed as a power-mad demon; in episode five his eyes even turn entirely black as he howls into the camera.

For his part, Jacson remains the unblemished servant of justice (apart from a single indiscretion with Frida Kahlo). Throughout, his character’s function is to judge the depraved Trotsky, and to be the righteous conscience of the viewer.

Even at the end, the murder of Trotsky is cast as a mercy. Trotsky is a failure — as a political revolutionary, as a father, and as a husband. He explicitly resolves to die at the hands of Jacson, even goading him into doing the deed as he berates Jacson’s cowardice while hitting him with his cane.

The assassination is merciful, so says Jacson, because if Trotsky were to commit suicide, then this would be “a signature of failure.” So Jacson is cast as the blameless hand of providence rather than

a cold-blooded killer. In actuality, Trotsky was mercilessly attacked from behind in his study, after which he attempted to fight his assassin.

Particularism Contra Universalism

The deep reason for Trotsky's failure, for the filmmakers, is that he tries to impose modernity on a traditional Russia. The whole October Revolution is seen as nothing more than a palace coup, orchestrated by a small-town "kike" (the most frequently used racial slur in the series) punching above his weight.

Indeed, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, Vladimir Lenin, is merely handed the helm of the revolution by its true mastermind, Trotsky; the latter demurs because, according to him, the Russian people will never accept a Jew as their leader. In any case, his real interest isn't Russia, but world revolution.

This brings us to the central tenet of the filmmakers' worldview. There are two kinds of people in this world: There are those who adhere to tradition, carry out their proper roles, and nurture concrete loyalties and cultural ties; and on the other hand, there are those who violently tear such organic bonds asunder in their universalism. Reason is seen as totalitarian, blotting out the essential differences between peoples.

Throughout the series, Trotsky perversely defends sacrificing others for the sake of "the great idea." In episode seven, he states that half of Russia's population may be killed so that the other half might live on under communism. This is presaged in episode three where Trotsky hammers a rabbit over the head in front of a horrified Jackson — a necessary "sacrifice" for the sake of dinner.

Trotsky's list of "sacrifices" includes the dwindled, starved populace of the Russian countryside; his own neglected children, who each perish in young adulthood; decimated ranks of Red Army soldiers; former Tsarist officers who valiantly commit suicide out of a sense of patriotism; and the executed Romanov imperial family.

In fact, historian Joshua Rubenstein has pointed out that Trotsky was not responsible for the execution of the tsar but was fighting at the front during this time. Trotsky's own plan for the imperial family was to hold formal court proceedings against the tsar, where Trotsky himself would serve as prosecutor.

Rubenstein goes on to point out that, "The tsar is an honored figure by the Russian Orthodox Church — to say that a Jew was behind his execution is a very incendiary accusation."

Crucially, every one of Trotsky's "sacrifices" are cast as wholly gratuitous, further cementing the series' image of Trotsky as a monster. Entirely neglected are the real, historical circumstances which prompted these deaths. Pre-revolutionary Russia was a thoroughly backward, violent, authoritarian, and racist landscape. These degradations were not authored by the Bolshevik revolution; to the contrary, the Bolshevik revolution came about, at least in part, as a response to them.

Authenticity Obsession

By erasing the social contradictions of White Russia, the film depicts the revolution as an insane, alien project imposed upon the good Russian people by megalomaniacal utopian thinkers emerging

from Viennese coffeehouses.

The axis of the film is the eternal conflict between the salt-of-the-earth, on the one hand, and the alien elements on the other. This is not a socio-economic fight, but a fight whose boundary line is authenticity versus inauthenticity.

The authentic camp includes not only hard-scrabble peasants, but also aristocratic officers, reactionary professors, and the “Little Father” (Tsar Nicholas II) himself. From the filmmakers’ perspective, this group is defined not by material interests or ideology, but instead by a sense of both duty and history. They compose, in all their diversity, an organic cultural family of Greater Russia.

Even the shtetl Jews find a place in this reactionary picture, so long as they remain thoroughly marginalized and subordinate — that is, as authentic “Jews” rather than as full citizens or people.

Meanwhile, Trotsky represents the pinnacle of inauthenticity, turning his back on his community, his family, and his traditional place in village society. His name is changed from the noticeably Jewish-sounding “Leiba Bronstein,” and he goes abroad to Europe as Leon Trotsky, only to return to Russia as a mad conqueror.

In perhaps the most poignant scene in the series, his father David Bronstein is beaten nearly to death by an antisemitic crowd of peasants. But even here, the context is bizarrely distorted. For the crowd is not motivated by their own hatred alone but agitated by propaganda posters apparently dictated by Trotsky himself. The filmmakers’ message is clear: Parochial Russia’s tranquility is upset by radical, speculative, and foreign ideas about universal emancipation.

Again, violence to the Jews is depicted as self-inflicted, holding traditional Russian society as blameless. To quote Jacob Maze, the chief rabbi of Moscow, “It’s ... Trotsky who signs the mortgage [of revolution] but it’s Leiba Bronstein who has to pay up for it.”

In other words, Trotsky can only *be* Trotsky by killing that part of himself that remains authentic and traditional — and selling out his community in the process.

The film’s antisemitism thus takes a definite shape: under no circumstances can the Jew become an assimilated part of Russian society or a first-class citizen. Their options are either internal or external exile. Internally, they find themselves totally subordinate and meek, and on the lowest rung of society. Externally, ambitious Jews may try to find their way in the world, but only by turning their back on organic Russian culture and their historic place in it. The Jew is either dirt or deracinated.

The International Jew

The archetypal, rootless Jew in this miniseries is actually not Trotsky himself. Revealingly, it is Alexander Parvus, a socialist theoretician and financier.

In the hands of the filmmakers, Parvus is transformed into the ultimate Judeo-phobic cartoon. He is a Svengali, manipulating geopolitics from behind the scenes. He is at once an arch-capitalist speculator and at the same time the patron of Marxist revolt; he rubs shoulders with German politicians in his fur-coat, and simultaneously whips the guileless Russian populace into frenzy with his machinations.

The opposite of Parvus in this film is Joseph Stalin. Early on, Stalin is shown being snubbed by the

arrogant Trotsky, who ignores his outstretched hand. In fact, he is the exact opposite of Trotsky and Parvus in every way. While the internationalist Jews want to rely on foreign financial aid, the earliest scene depicting Stalin has him as a heroic highwayman, “expropriating” funds from the rich to give to the Russian revolutionaries.

While Trotsky wants to stack the army with experts and former Tsarist officers, Stalin balks at this, insisting that the Bolsheviks do not need the aid of their upper-class enemies. While Trotsky and Parvus are meticulous in their dress and florid in their speech, Stalin is described as boorish, rude, and even a bit dull. But this mediocrity is no insult: It is a sign of authenticity, making Stalin closer to the common folk.

Here the filmmakers tip their hand. In valorizing Stalin, they admit that the line between virtue and vice, authenticity and inauthenticity, runs across the historical contests for political power. The former Tsarist officers and Stalin are each heroes in their own ways, evincing a masculinity and sense of patriotism absent from Trotsky and Parvus. The latter pair ultimately represents modernity itself; they reduce human endeavor to money, power, and sex. They desecralize the world, replacing heroic masculinity with subterfuge and speculation.

This is how Putin’s Russia can worship at the altar of both Joseph Stalin [2] and the Russian Orthodox Church at the same time [3]. They are everything Putin’s enemies are not.

Putin’s Nationalism

It does not matter that Stalin was a theology school drop-out, an atheist, and a Soviet strongman. His reputation as the “man of steel” who patriotically defended his country in times of war accommodates him perfectly to the national church’s ethos. This is not to mention Stalin’s social policies [4], which reversed progressive gains in family, gender, and reproductive rights won during the revolution [5].

Putin’s domestic political enemies are billionaire oligarchs, a disproportionate number of which are of Jewish extraction. His external enemies are not only the European Union and NATO but American neoconservatism at large. These enemies, foreign and domestic, are collectively cast as degenerate universalists — crushing national traditions and hierarchies through the power of world markets, human rights, liberal democracy, and the Washington consensus.

Of course, Putin — a billionaire in his own right — is no anticapitalist, and capitalism can’t bring universal emancipation. But it is crucial that Putin draws the friend/enemy distinction here. Only in this way can he appropriate the former martial glory of the Soviet Union while painting the Bolsheviks as dangerous and destabilizing for Russia [6].

This bizarre anachronism totally ignores the materialist and class-based realities of modern politics. It ignores the fact that working people are exploited across borders by global capitalism. At the same time, it buries the fact that a chauvinistic nationalism has never been the savior of working people, either. The working class has been at its most powerful when it has reached across national boundaries to connect with other workers in common struggle.

The real contest now is not between nationalism and international finance, but between both of these forces of reaction, on the one hand, and universal emancipation on the other. The historical Leon Trotsky is an emblem of this international struggle. But the Leon Trotsky of Netflix is an antisemitic libel.

P.S.

• Jacobin, 02.17.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/trotsky-show-netflix-antisemitism-stalin>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russian-tv-series-claims-jewish-trotsky-masterminded-the-blood-y-1917-revolution/>

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fworldviews%2fwp%2f2017%2f06%2f26%2ffor-russians-stalin-is-the-most-outstanding-figure-in-world-history-putin-is-next%2f%3fnoredirect%3don%26utm_term%3d.e9222a194b3e&noredirect=on&utm_term=.faa3c45b91d0

[3] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/10/putin-wants-god-or-at-least-the-church-on-his-side/>

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_under_communism#Soviet_Union

[5] ESSF (article 47868), [Family, Youth and Culture \("The Revolution Betrayed", Chapter 7\)](#).

[6] <https://www.newsweek.com/russias-putin-accused-lenin-ruining-soviet-union-418519>