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The Dark Knight Returns - Netflix's 'Trotsky' is a sinister and reactionary rewriting of history

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Netflix's 'Trotsky' is a sinister and reactionary rewriting of history, intended to benefit the right-wingers who dominate modern Russian politics.

Watching the miniseries *Trotsky*, made by Russia's Channel One in 2017, it is hard not be reminded of Christopher Nolan's entries into the Batman franchise, both in ideology and aesthetics. In the first episode, we are treated to seeing Lev Bronstein, an idealistic and naïve revolutionary concerned with human rights, becoming the cold and devious Leon Trotsky, a man beguiled by power and fame, disinterested in the amount of blood on his hands. This transformation is facilitated by the other Trotsky, Nikolai, The Chief Warden at Odessa Prison, a classical Dostoevsky-styled reactionary who warns the future Trotsky, over a game of chess, that liberating the Russian masses would lead to an untold level of destruction of society, and that power, once claimed, can only be exercised through terror. Trotsky is haunted by these words in his dark solitary cell and undergoes a terrifying metamorphosis, becoming in his words, the 'greatest monster', and he puts on the pelt of his jailer, through his adoption of the name Trotsky.

These scenes are highly reminiscent of Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman, the master of fear and darkness, under the tuition of the venerable Ra's al Ghul. Both transformations belong to fiction. In his 1930 autobiography *My Life*, Trotsky assigns his choice of nom de guerre, written in a forged passport, to a completely random memory. Isaac Deutscher's first volume of his colossal biography of Trotsky, *The Prophet Armed*, identifies the source of the name Trotsky as originally belonging to a jailer, but one that was 'obscure' and certainly not the Chief Warden of the Odessa Prison. According to Deutscher, Trotsky's actual relationship with the Gendarme in charge of his interrogations while imprisoned in Odessa was one of mockery.

So, who in fact is the Nikolai Trotsky portrayed in the mini-series? Where do his words and 'wisdom' come from? The answer can be found in current Russian official history. The personal view of Vladimir Putin on the October Revolution was summed up in a 2017 speech to teachers and students: 'Someone decided to shake Russia from inside, and rocked things so much that the Russian state crumbled. A complete betrayal of national interests! We have such people today as well.' Officially, modern Russia walks a tightrope between two historiographies. Lenin's Tomb exists alongside shrines to the now canonised Romanov family; the Soviet Union is invoked as a great power, but never as the outcome of a mass uprising.

One of the more sinister parallels between the series and official historical discourse is the introduction of the figure of Alexander Parvus, a Russian Jewish socialist and writer for exile publications such as *Iskra*. While it is undeniable that Parvus was indeed a collaborator with German

Military Intelligence in hope that the defeat of the Russian Empire in wartime would hasten socialist revolution in his homeland, Trotsky portrays Parvus via the anti-Semitic trope of Jews as bankrollers and profiteers of revolutionary chaos, in imagery pulled straight from the propaganda of the White Armies in the Russian Civil War. Whereas Nikolai Trotsky teaches Lev Bronstein the art of ruthlessness and terror, Parvus is portrayed as teaching Trotsky manipulation and deception, creating his image as professional revolutionary through new clothes, in order to 'conceal his demons' and 'appeal to the masses.'

In a scene set in 1918, we are shown Trotsky using such showmanship and deception to convince revolutionary soldiers to, as the script puts it, 'kill fellow Russians' by gifting a soldier the watch off his wrist, only for it later to be revealed that Trotsky has a drawerful of similar watches. Trotsky then orders a regiment of men to be decimated by firing squad. Within just the first 45 minutes, wildly anti-Semitic imagery from a long and terrible tradition of Russian reactionary thought has set the course for the rest of the series. *Trotsky* ultimately resembles a marriage of the antediluvian politics of aristocratic White Russian emigres with the contemporary populist blockbuster aesthetics of Zack Snyder or Christopher Nolan. Much as the contemporary far-right have gone about rebranding themselves as 'populists' opposed to 'globalists' backed with 'Soros money', Trotsky has wrapped those politics in a matching populist aesthetic. This isn't some meticulous historical epic in the Soviet tradition of Eisenstein, Bondarchuk or Tarkovsky, but a lurid tale of supervillainy, enticing viewers with lashings of sex and violence.

As the series goes on, it becomes clear why the character of Trotsky was chosen as the focal point for a series released on the centenary of the Russian Revolution. Not because of a breaking of Soviet era taboos, as has been suggested, but to create an image of Trotsky that can serve as a terrible scapegoat for a historical period that still raises uncomfortable questions in modern Russia. Watching *Trotsky*, one would believe that Trotsky was the shadowy mastermind of the revolution, hiding behind Lenin's public image, the man who created Stalin as his 'golem' and then lost control, a man who made himself a monster, obsessed with power and control, surrounded by sex and death - and yet at the same time a puppet of an anti-Russian conspiracy. Quietly, series producer Konstantin Ernst has admitted that the series is intended as a 'semi-fictional' dramatisation, 'based on' the character of Trotsky. It's a rather sinister and reactionary fantasy, born out of the harsh political climate of contemporary Russia.

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P.S.

- <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/02/the-dark-knight-returns>