

# Stalin vs Trotsky

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## I. Dzhugashvili and Bronstein

Joseph Stalin, born Dzhugashvili, and Leon Trotsky, born Bronstein, were the same age, and both had been from early youth members of the Russian Social Democratic party. As dedicated Communists, they had common basic outlook: they were philosophical materialists, committed to the unity of theory and practice and bent upon spreading Communism throughout the whole world. While Lenin was alive (at any rate until 1922) both men had a secure place in his favor and therefore in the party as a whole. Since 1917, at least, Trotsky had supported Lenin on the main issues and seemed to have more of his candor and flexibility than Stalin. However, as Lenin sickened and died, the mutual antagonism between Trotsky and Stalin, who had never been compatible, deepened into a life-and-death struggle.

### A. Stalin

It is difficult to compare the later lives of the two men, for Stalin achieved sole power and Trotsky was exiled. Since Trotsky thus escaped Stalin's dilemmas, it is uncertain how he would have responded to them, although he detested Stalin's rule. Stalin hated his adversary so deeply that he caused his name to be written simply "Judas Trotsky" in officially commissioned books, but he borrowed many of his ideas and methods. Their earlier lives, however, suggest something of the personal differences which were to be complicated by disagreements over doctrine and practice.

Stalin was the eldest surviving child of the shoemaker Vissarion Dzhugashvili of Gori in Georgia. Today the hut in which he was born is preserved by a temple-like structure erected over it. As a boy he attended a church school in Gori and then the theological seminary in Tiflis. Today the seminary has been converted into a museum of medieval Georgian art. Young Joseph joined a Marxist society known as Mesame-Dasi while a student at the seminary, but it is not clear whether this had anything to do with his expulsion in 1899. During the next two years his Marxism crystallized, and his first Marxist essays appeared in a Georgian newspaper in 1901. At that time he was already an enthusiastic defender of Lenin and the other orthodox Marxist exiles who published the newspaper *Iskra*. His literary style was not then distinguished; in fact, it never got much better.

Stalin was active in the revolutionary movement in Tiflis, Batum, and elsewhere, not as Dzhugashvili, nor yet "Stalin," but as "Koba." This meant something like "courageous" in Turkish, and it was also the name of a labeled Georgian freebooter. It is uncertain which the nickname first signified. Later he was called, indeed, practically dubbed himself, the "Lenin of the Caucasus." However, he was not necessarily the most outstanding leader of the Caucasian Social Democrats, nor even of the Georgian Bolsheviks after the party split in 1903. The great majority of the Marxists in Georgia became and stayed Menshevik. Among the Bolsheviks Stalin was prominent, but that did not mean a great deal. Very soon after the news of the London Congress of 1903 reached the Caucasus, he took a firmly pro-Bolshevik stand, and he continued to do so in 1905. It seems that it was at the Tammerfors Party conference at the end of 1905, that Stalin first met Lenin.

After the Revolution of 1905, in defiance of the ban of the then Menshevik-controlled Party, "Koba" led "fighting squads" in raiding banks in order to augment scant Party funds. In one raid in Tiflis a squad seized a quarter of a million rubles. This is the basis of the legend that Stalin was a bank robber. But he did not act as gunman, and he did not pocket the proceeds. He spent much of the period between revolutions in jail or in exile, but made a few important trips abroad in 1912.

By this time the Bolshevik organizations in Russia had been gravely weakened, and the Bolsheviks of the Caucasus had assumed an importance quite out of proportion to their numbers. Stalin had become editor of the Party newspaper, *Pravda*, and he was co-opted by Lenin onto the Party Central Committee just after the Prague conference of 1912, at which the Bolsheviks broke permanently with the other Marxist factions. He visited Lenin in exile and spent some time with him. As a result of their

talks, he wrote an essay on the "nationalities question" which led Lenin to inform Gorky that a "wonderful Georgian" had done a fine job on the subject. The pseudonym with which the pamphlet was signed was "K. Stalin."

At the outbreak of World War I Stalin was in Siberian exile, sharing a hut with Sverdlov, future Chairman of the Presidium (president) of the Soviet republic, who, it seems, found Stalin an uncomradely hut partner. Stalin chose not to try to escape during the war. In 1916 he was summoned to Krasnoïarsk to be drafted but was found physically unfit for military service owing to his withered left arm. During the war period he apparently wrote next to nothing.

Liberated by the February Revolution, Stalin hastened to Petrograd and, as the only member of the Central Committee on the spot, assumed temporary leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Like almost all other Bolsheviks, he became identified with the movement for reunification with the Mensheviks. When Lenin arrived and sharply castigated such tendencies to compromise, Stalin was as dumfounded as anyone else, but he took his scolding without protest. He owed his position in the Party to the fact that he worked hard and did not argue with his comrades, especially Lenin.

## B. Trotsky

Trotsky, like Stalin, was born in 1879. His real name was Lev Davidovich Bronstein. His father was a well-to-do Jewish farmer in the Ukrainian province of Kherson. He attended school in Odessa, developing an early brilliance and bookishness. He reports his observation of the composition of his class: "the tale-bearers and envious at one pole, the frank, courageous boys at the other, and the neutral, vacillating mass in the middle." He was to apply the same threefold classification to his fellow revolutionaries and fellow citizens of the Empire and the world. In his teens he went to Nikolaev, met a number of populists, became enamored of a girl in the group, and accepted the populist doctrine. Soon, however, he became converted to Marxism, engaged in revolutionary activity, and for it spent his eighteenth birthday in jail. He was exiled to Siberia but soon escaped and arrived in London in 1902 to join Lenin. In Western Europe he met another young lady. The girl from Nikolaev was known as Mrs. Bronstein, the Parisian as Mrs. Trotsky, and neither seemed to complain.

After the II Congress in 1903 Trotsky was for a time associated with the Mensheviks, but in 1905 he developed an independent doctrinal line and between revolutions belonged to neither the Bolshevik nor the Menshevik wing. In 1905 he won renown for his brief chairmanship of the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies. During the next few years he tried to reunite the Party and for that reason refrained from trying to build a faction of his own. None of the other groups found this pose to its taste. During the years just before World War I Trotsky's anti-factionalist stand became in effect an anti-Leninist one. After the war began he went to New York, and it was from there that he traveled to Russia in the spring of 1917. During the summer he joined the Bolshevik Party, although he clearly implied that his only reason for doing so was that the party had belatedly adopted the analysis and tactical line which he had espoused all along.

His ability and his logic did not always endear him to his comrades, but his oratorical and practical gifts did win him broad popularity among the urban workers and soldiers in late 1917 and during the Civil War. Having failed as foreign commissar to put into effect his dialectical but quixotic policy of "no war, no peace," he had become war commissar, and his most brilliant success was achieved in organizing the finally victorious Red Army. As war commissar he clashed with Stalin, who ensconced himself at Tsaritsyn with some of his old friends from Caucasus days and flouted Trotsky's authority. However, Stalin was as yet no adversary in the field of theory and policy, which Trotsky considered fundamental.

As the triumvirate took form, Trotsky was plainly the most important figure outside it. But no one regarded Stalin as the most eminent of the three. Zinoviev, especially, had an international prestige which Stalin lacked, while both Kamenev and he were regarded as theorists in a way Stalin was not--and a Communist leader had to be a theorist. As the struggle developed between Trotsky and the triumvirs, Stalin counted less on his own influence than on Trotsky's vulnerability. He did not at first try to turn the struggle into a personal contest. An eye witness has told the story of how Zinoviev and Kamenev would snub Trotsky in Politburo meetings, while Stalin would greet him warmly

## II. Trotsky Against the Triumvirate

On the eve of Lenin's death, the Thirteenth Party Conference published, on Stalin's motion, the decision empowering the Central Committee to expel Party members for factionalism. At the moment the leader died a new sanctity enveloped his every word and deed, including this decision, in which Lenin had taken part. Simultaneously the triumvirs decreed a new recruiting campaign, nominally with a view to strengthening the actual worker element in Party ranks. Actually Stalin, as general secretary, was able to bolster his own influence by guiding the Party machinery in selecting new members. In a few short weeks nearly a quarter of a million men and women were admitted in the new "Lenin enrollment."

At the time of the XIII Party Congress in May 1924, the economic situation was improving sufficiently to enable the triumvirs to call their critics to account. Zinoviev openly attacked Trotsky and demanded that he retract his "errors." As Stalin had only shortly before opposed Zinoviev's demand for Trotsky's arrest, he found it wise to remain in the background. Trotsky replied to Zinoviev with a *cri de coeur* which went to the root of his whole position, morally requiring him to sit passive in the face of doom:

The party in the last analysis is always right because the party is the single historic instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its fundamental problems. I have already said that in front of one's own party nothing could be easier than to say: all my criticisms, my statements, my warnings, my protests--the whole thing was a mere mistake. I, however, comrades, cannot say that, because I do not think it. I know that one must not be right against the party. One can be right only with the party, and through the party, for history has created no other road for the realization of what is right.

The Congress was unmoved. It promptly took steps to discipline the Russian Trotskyites, as well as dissidents in the other parties of the Comintern.

## **A. "Permanent Revolution"**

After the XIII Congress, as far as could be seen the chief antagonists were Trotsky on the one hand and Zinoviev and Kamenev on the other. In the autumn of 1924 Trotsky published *The Lessons of October*, in which he distinguished between objectively revolutionary situations and subjective failures of revolutionary leaders in such situations. As illustrations of the latter, he cited Zinoviev's and Kamenev's opposition to Lenin's decision to launch an armed uprising in the fall of 1917--thus reopening an extremely ugly wound--and he also implied that Zinoviev was largely responsible for the failure of the German Communist revolt of 1923.

Trotsky restated his old theory of "permanent revolution," with its emphasis on the world leadership of the proletariat and its implicit challenge to the Leninist position on the role of the poor peasantry in building socialism. "October," said Trotsky, was the crucial stage in the history of the Party. "October" meant to him the time when Lenin adopted Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution--at least in the sense of rapid passage from the bourgeois to the socialist stage.

Trotsky had made a tactical error. By his emphasis on "October" he opened the way for Zinoviev and Kamenev to retaliate by reminding the Party again of Trotsky's sharp disagreements with Lenin prior to 1917. Stalin's caution had reaped its reward. Since he was not directly drawn into this controversy, he was in a position to make public statements in November which in effect forgave Zinoviev and Kamenev for their earlier mistakes--he even acknowledged some of his own--but forcefully recalled to his hearers the fact that Trotsky was, after all, a newcomer in Party ranks.

## **B. "Socialism in one country"**

Meanwhile Stalin unleashed a new weapon, which Trotsky probably had not considered him capable of producing. He set forth a theoretical position of his own from which he could challenge Trotsky. In order to do so he had to reverse himself within the space of a few months. In *Foundations of Leninism*~ published early in 1924, he had denied that a proletarian dictatorship could establish socialism before the victory of the world revolution. A few months later, in *Problems of Leninism*, he advanced his theory of "Socialism in one country."

The theory was an innovation and a repudiation of some things which Lenin had said years earlier; but it was a perfectly logical extension of what Lenin had said and done in 1917 and later. If the Russian Communists were not to be indefinitely bogged down in the NEP state, they must push on to socialism, even if the world revolution was still further delayed. Authority for such an effort could be found in Lenin. Like Lenin, Trotsky believed the building of socialism could begin in Russia alone. But what Stalin did was to assert that it could be completed with success and to furnish reasons for his contention. Russia was an enormous country, rich in natural resources. Provided that "capitalist" intervention was not renewed, the Russian proletariat, drawing on Russia's great potential wealth and protected by its vast spaces, could accomplish the task.

For a time, however, the theory of "socialism in one country" was overshadowed by the acrimonious personal struggle between Trotsky and the two most prominent triumvirs. In January 1925 the Central Committee removed Trotsky from the War Commissariat, even though he remained in uneasy possession of a seat on the Politburo. This was the decisive blow. Although he was still not completely crushed, Trotsky receded to the background. If he had been another kind of man, he might have tried to use the Red Army against his adversaries, but his loyalty to the Party was paramount, and he accepted his deposition without trying to resist.

Although Trotsky was defeated, Zinoviev and Kamenev soon discovered that the victory was not theirs. In March 1925 the Fourteenth Conference of the Party accepted Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country," while Zinoviev and Kamenev paid little attention. Soon afterward Stalin was able to break up the triumvirate quietly. Too late Zinoviev and Kamenev attacked Stalin's new theory. By the middle of 1925 he had found new allies in Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsy, who accepted "socialism in one country." Far from yet aspiring openly to individual power, Stalin chose to be regarded as a mediator, and he asserted that "after Ilich [Lenin]" collegial--or what would later be called "collective"--leadership was the only conceivable way of running the party.

### III. Stalin allied with the Right

Rykov had become Lenin's successor as chairman of the Council of People's Commissars. Tomsy was the leader of the Soviet trade-unions. Bukharin, the "Left" Communist of 1918, was now, like Rykov and Tomsy, on the "right" and the leader of those who felt that the NEP was a success, and while indeed socialism might be built in Russia, the ground was secure and there was no great need for haste. Zinoviev and Kamenev, on the contrary, were profoundly uneasy about the continuation of the NEP, but they had been abruptly thrust into the minority. In the autumn of 1925 Zinoviev published his Leninism, attacking NEP as a policy of "continuous retreat," and demanded a renewal of the "policy of 1918" directed against the kulak. Zinoviev managed to use his position in Leningrad to rally the powerful Party organization there to his support, in opposition to the new Politburo majority.

Zinoviev and Kamenev tardily recognized Stalin as the man from whom they had most to fear and carefully prepared an attack on him for the XIV Party Congress, to be held in December 1925. However, the plan completely miscarried. Kamenev, who spoke most sharply in criticism of Stalin at the Congress, was punished by demotion from full member to candidate member of the Politburo. As reconstituted just after the Congress, the Politburo had three new full members: Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kalinin, all loyal henchmen of Stalin's. Stalin also added several supporters to the list of candidate members of the Politburo and to the newly enlarged Central Committee.

Shortly before, Voroshilov had replaced Michael Frunze, who had been named Trotsky's successor but had died soon afterward, as war commissar. Stalin had established a formidable position of strength within both Party and government. Leningrad remained the only stronghold of resistance, and Stalin followed up his victory at the XIV Congress by sending Sergei Kirov to replace Zinoviev as Party leader there, ordering him to clean out the opposition.

Only then, in the spring of 1926, when the supporters of all three had been scattered, did Zinoviev and Kamenev make common cause with Trotsky. Stalin's reaction was, "Ah, they have granted themselves a mutual amnesty"--since a few short months earlier they had been bitterly attacking each other. The three were united enough in their opposition to continuance of the NEP and the "alliance with the middle peasantry" on which it was based; but their past personal antagonisms made their alliance an uneasy and incongruous one.

In the meantime the Right wing of the Politburo was championing the NEP and all that it implied. Bukharin advised the peasants, "Enrich yourselves," which was a phrase Guizot had used under the French monarchy of Louis Philippe, whatever Marxist glosses might be given it. At the XIV Congress Bukharin had set forth the basis on which he accepted Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country": "We shall creep at a snail's pace, but...we are building socialism and ... we shall complete the building of it." This amounted to a frame of mind to which the NEP idea was congenial, rather than something uneasily and temporarily accepted for tactical reasons.

For the time being, however, Stalin was less concerned about policy than with getting rid of his enemies in the Left Opposition led by Zinoviev and Trotsky, which was not hard for him to do. In July 1926 Lashevich, a Zinovievite who was Voroshilov's deputy war commissar, was accused for organizing oppositionist groups within the Red Army and was dismissed. Stalin seized the opportunity to expel Zinoviev from the Politburo. On October 4 all the major opposition leaders replied with a statement admitting violation of Party statutes and pledging disbandment of the opposition, but they could not refrain from repeating their policy criticisms of the Politburo majority.

Stalin's reply was to remove Trotsky from the Politburo and Zinoviev from the presidency of the Comintern. However, lesser figures in the opposition leadership were allowed to recant and to obtain well-publicized rewards for their submission. At the end of October 1926 the Fifteenth Party Conference sanctioned all these maneuvers and applauded Stalin's description of the opposition leaders as "Social Democratic" deviators who were reverting to the line of the Second International.

By the beginning of 1927 the Left Opposition had thus lost any immediate hope of success, but its leaders were not yet silenced. Trotsky and his colleagues attacked the Politburo for "Thermidorism, degeneration, Menshevism, betrayal, treachery, kulak-nepman policy against the workers, against the poor peasants, against the Chinese revolution," as the Stalinist writer Popov sums it up. The opposition leaders were able to blame the Politburo majority for a series of foreign setbacks: Britain's rupture of diplomatic relations with the USSR, the assassination of the Soviet ambassador in Warsaw, and especially the crushing of the Chinese Communists by Chiang-Kai-shek.

In an article submitted to Pravda, Trotsky climaxed opposition criticism by calling on his adherents to follow the example of Clemenceau (who had opened the way to take over as French premier by attacking his predecessor's failures in World War I) in case war engulfed the USSR (a prospect taken seriously by the Communists in 1927). However, advocating a change of government was dangerous in the Soviet Union. If, as all good Communists agreed, the existing regime represented the proletariat, then any move to change it was bound to be anti-proletarian and therefore treasonable. For that reason Stalin promptly engineered the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev from the Central Committee. After the two men led street demonstrations on the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7, 1927), they were expelled from the Party.

The way was now clear for Stalin to oust the opposition from the Party en masse. The XV Congress, in December 1927, decreed as much. It might have been expected that Stalin's tactics would have drawn his opponents together, but on the contrary, the result was that they were neatly split down the middle. Trotsky refused to accept the Congress decision and was thereupon exiled to Alma Ata in Central Asia. But Zinoviev and Kamenev submitted and renounced their earlier-stated views. They were permitted to crawl back into the Party.

## IV. Trotsky Defeated

As far as the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern were concerned, the controversy between Stalin and Trotsky was now at an end. The followers of Trotsky left what they henceforth called "Stalinist" ranks and attempted to build their own parties and organize them into a Fourth International. The dispute shook and divided the Communist parties throughout the world as no such controversy before or since ever did (the immediately ensuing struggle between Stalin and Bukharin had fewer repercussions abroad, for it seemed to center on the peasant, for whom most Communists never had any use).

By 1927, however, Trotsky and his sympathizers had given up any immediate hope of overcoming Stalin's ascendancy from within the Russian Party. They declared that a "bureaucracy" had come to power in the USSR, and that it must be eliminated. This assertion was difficult to explain on Marxist

grounds, unless it were to be on the basis of Marx's analysis of Oriental society, and the Trotskyites shrank from that. Since Trotsky continued to believe that a distorted socialism still existed in the USSR, it was also difficult to think of any way through which the Stalinist leadership could be displaced without disturbing the economic foundation. As a result the Trotskyites had to retreat into a position comparable to that of the prewar Social Democrats, opposing all existing governments and declaring that there could be no basic improvement unless they took power. They never managed to do so anywhere.

The rank and file of the world's Communists had little chance to observe the personal differences and antagonisms between Stalin and Trotsky, and supported one or the other on the basis of his theoretical position. The differences may be briefly formulated thus: Trotsky declared that it was impossible to build socialism in Russia because the peasants did not want it. That it would only be possible to do so if the workers of the West revolted, and he was right. Stalin declared that it was impossible to wait for the Western workers to revolt before building socialism, because they were not likely to revolt in the immediate future. Therefore socialism could be built in Russia only if the Party used the peasantry, and he was also right.

However, that the Western workers were not Communist, Trotsky could never admit. He could only assert that they would be soon. The Russian peasants were not Communist, Stalin could never admit, but he could try to compel them to be. As a result Trotsky retreated into utopianism, while Stalin proceeded to establish a minority dictatorship built on terror.