

WINNER OF THE DUFF COOPER PRIZE 2009

Critically acclaimed author of *Lenin, Stalin and Comrades*

ROBERT SERVICE

TROTSKY

A BIOGRAPHY

'Exemplary' Robert Harris, *Sunday Times*

ROBERT SERVICE

TROTSKY

A BIOGRAPHY

PAN BOOKS

CONTENTS

[List of Illustrations](#)

[Maps](#)

[Preface](#)

[A Note on Usages](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[PART ONE: 1879–1913](#)

[1. THE FAMILY BRONSTEIN](#)

[2. UPBRINGING](#)

[3. SCHOOLING](#)

[4. THE YOUNG REVOLUTIONARY](#)

[5. LOVE AND PRISON](#)

[6. SIBERIAN EXILE](#)

[7. ISKRA](#)

[8. CUTTING LOOSE](#)

[9. THE YEAR 1905](#)

[10. TRIAL AND PUNISHMENT](#)

[11. AGAIN THE EMIGRANT](#)

[12. UNIFIER](#)

[13. SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT](#)

[PART TWO: 1914–1919](#)

[14. WAR ON THE WAR](#)

[15. DESIGNS FOR REVOLUTION](#)

[16. ATLANTIC CROSSINGS](#)

[17. NEARLY A BOLSHEVIK](#)

- 18. THREATS AND PROMISES
- 19. SEIZURE OF POWER
- 20. PEOPLE’S COMMISSAR
- 21. TROTSKY AND THE JEWS
- 22. BREST-LITOVSK
- 23. KAZAN AND AFTER
- 24. ALMOST THE COMMANDER
- 25. RED VICTORY
- 26. WORLD REVOLUTION
- PART THREE: 1920–1928
- 27. IMAGES AND THE LIFE
- 28. PEACE AND WAR
- 29. BACK FROM THE BRINK
- 30. DISPUTING ABOUT REFORM
- 31. THE POLITICS OF ILLNESS
- 32. THE LEFT OPPOSITION
- 33. ON THE CULTURAL FRONT
- 34. FAILING TO SUCCEED
- 35. ENTOURAGE AND FACTION
- 36. LIVING WITH TROTSKY
- 37. WHAT TROTSKY WANTED
- 38. LAST STAND IN MOSCOW
- 39. ALMA-ATA
- PART FOUR: 1929–1940
- 40. BÜYÜKADA
- 41. LOOKING FOR REVOLUTIONS
- 42. THE WRITER
- 43. RUSSIAN CONNECTIONS
- 44. EUROPE SOUTH AND NORTH
- 45. SETTING UP IN MEXICO
- 46. THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL
- 47. TROTSKY AND HIS WOMEN
- 48. ‘THE RUSSIAN QUESTION’
- 49. CONFRONTING THE PHILOSOPHERS

[50. THE SECOND WORLD WAR](#)
[51. ASSASSINATION](#)
[52. THE KEEPERS AND THE FLAME](#)

[Notes](#)

[Select Bibliography](#)

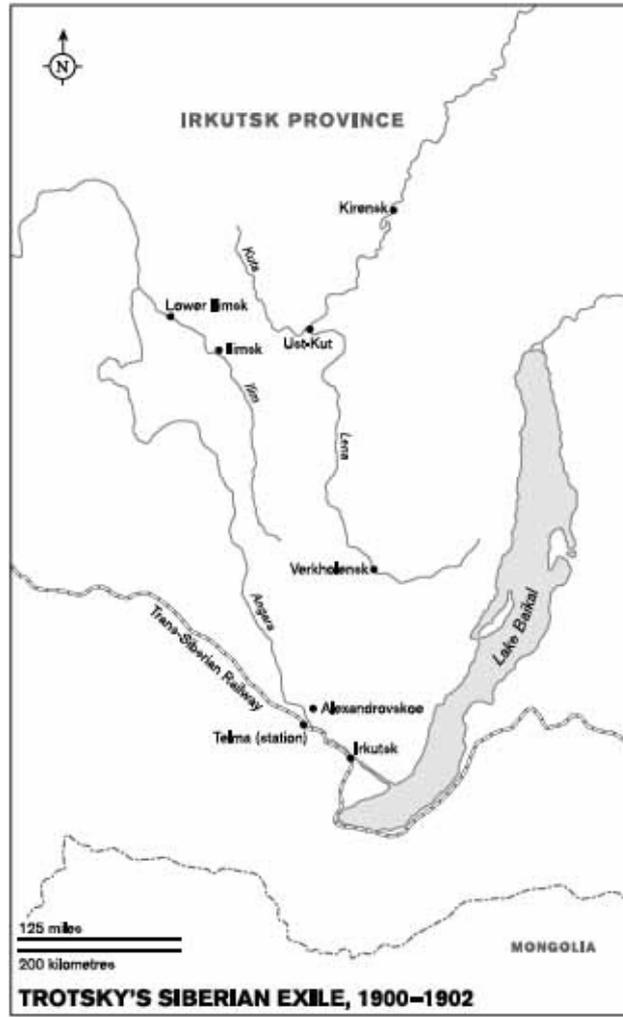
[Index](#)

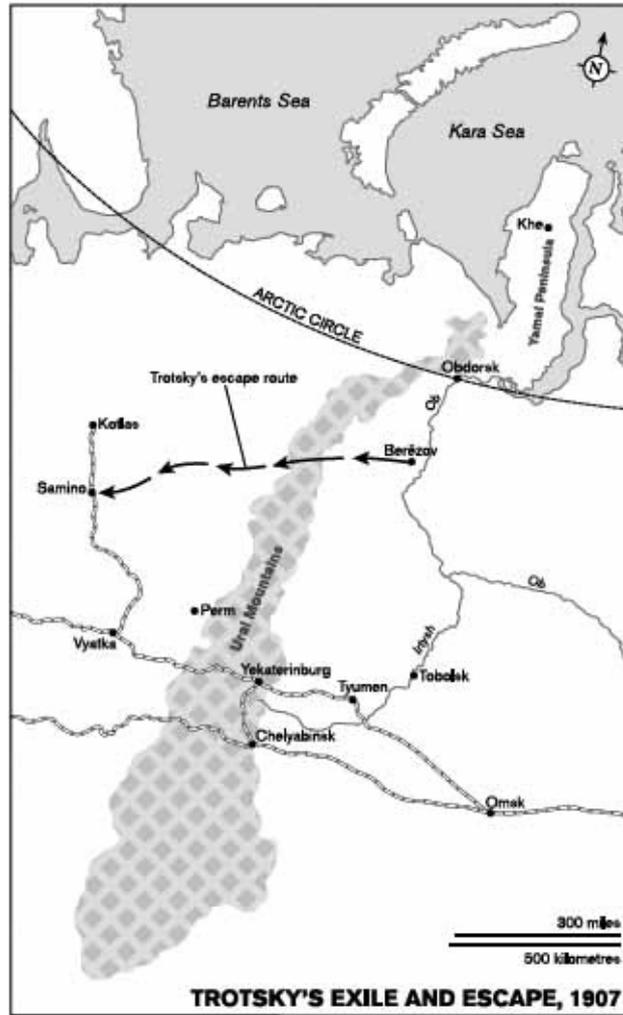
List of Illustrations

- [1. Trotsky as a youth. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [2. Trotsky and his wife Alexandra. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [3. Vladimir Lenin in 1895. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [4. Yuli Martov as young man. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [5. Georgi Plekhanov. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [6. Trotsky and his daughter Zina before the Great War. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [7. Lenin in January 1918 in his first official portrait as Soviet leader. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [8. Trotsky on Red Square in 1919. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [9. Trotsky on his train during the Civil War. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [10. Clare Sheridan regarding her bust of Trotsky. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [11. An anti-Semitic cartoon of Trotsky by Kurfell. \(Library of Congress / Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [12. Trotsky, doodling his own name at a political meeting. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [13. Trotsky scribbling about Stalin and doodling. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [14. Trotsky's personal questionnaire at the Tenth Congress of Soviets in December 1922. \(Library of Congress / Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [15. Stalin in 1924. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [16. Khristian Rakovski. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [17. Trotsky's address book in Alma Ata in 1928–29. \(Nicolaevsky Collection, Hoover Institute Archive\)](#)
- [18. Trotsky in Turkey. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [19. Trotsky in his working clothes in Turkey. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [20. Natalya as photographed in Paris in the 1930s. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [21. Stalin in 1932. \(David King Collection\)](#)
- [22. The Izzet Pasha house on Büyükkada. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [23. The house at Kadiköy. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [24. Trotsky and his son Lev. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [25. Zina Bronstein. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [26. Sergei Sedov. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [27. Lev Sedov. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [28. Jeanne Martin des Pallières. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)
- [29. A cartoon of Trotsky in a Fourth International publication. \(Hoover Institute Archives\)](#)

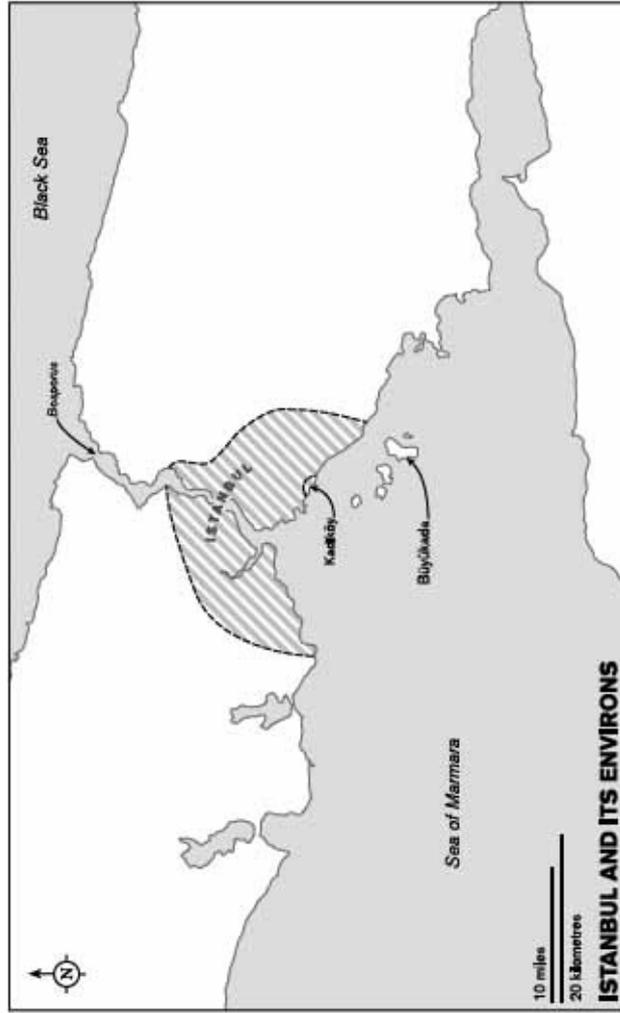
- [30. The Blue House at Coyoacán. \(*Tina Jennings*\)](#)
- [31. Trotsky and Natalya. \(*David King Collection*\)](#)
- [32. Frida Kahlo. \(*Corbis*\)](#)
- [33. Trotsky in Diego Rivera's 'Time Machine' mural. \(*Scala Archives*\)](#)
- [34. Trotsky's office in the villa in Avenida Viena. \(*Tina Jennings*\)](#)
- [35. Avenida Viena. \(*Karen Sánchez-Dahl*\)](#)
- [36. Ramón Mercader. \(*courtesy of the author*\)](#)
- [37. Trotsky shortly after his death. \(*Lebrecht Music and Arts Photography / Photographers Direct*\)](#)
- [38. The monument of Trotsky in the garden of the Avenida Viena villa. \(*Adele Biagi*\)](#)

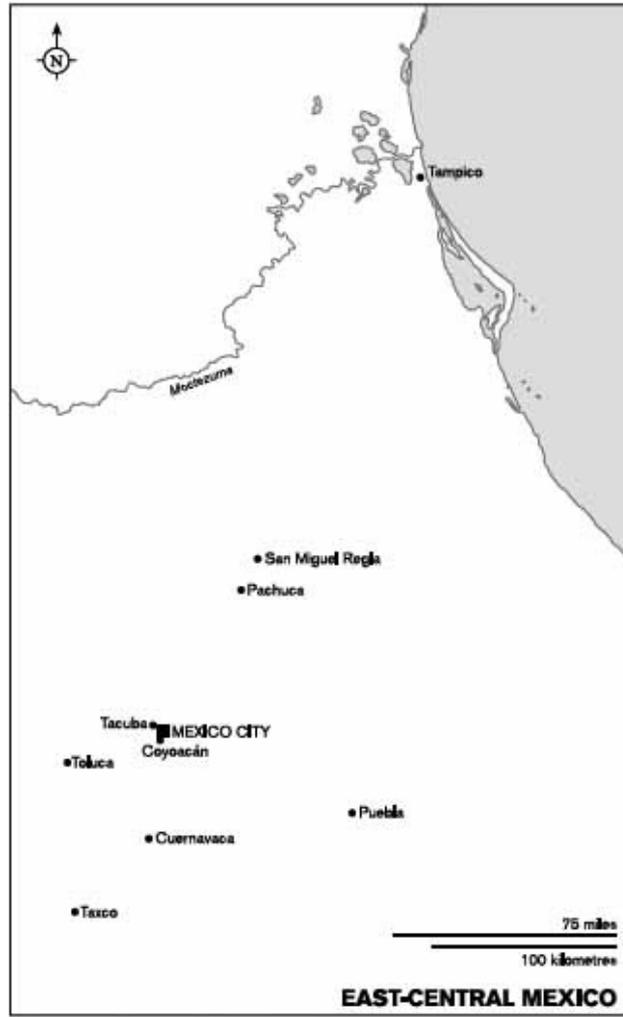


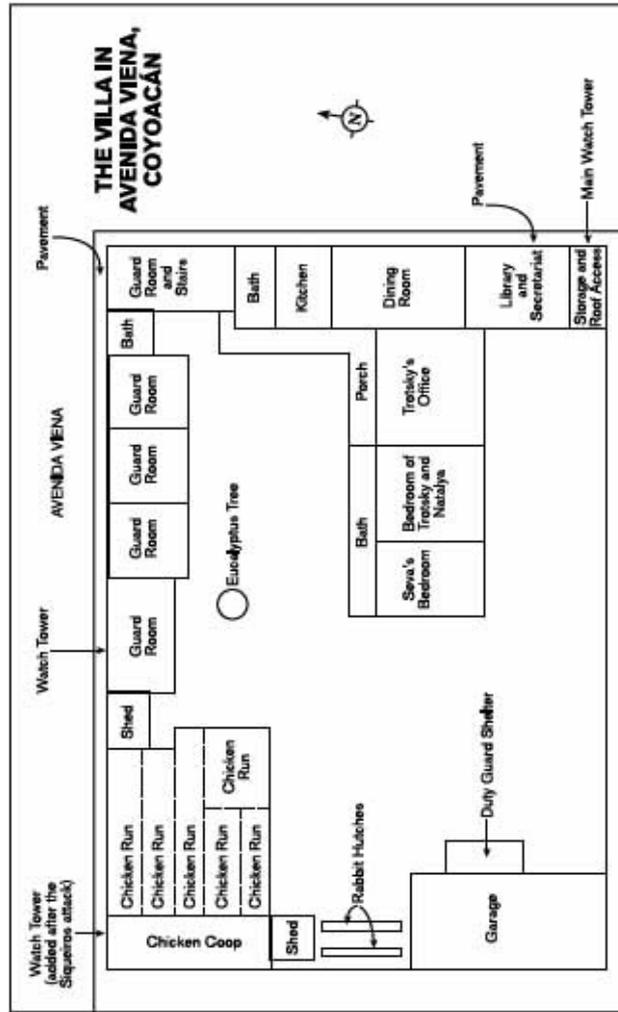












Preface

This is the third book in a trilogy about the leaders of the early Soviet state. The Hoover Institution has been my base for the archival research, and I am grateful to Director John Raisian, Senior Associate Director Richard Sousa and Board of Overseers member Tad Taube, as well as to the Sarah Scaife Foundation, for the friendly, efficient way they set up the opportunity to carry out the work at Stanford. Deborah Ventura and Celeste Szeto too could not have been more helpful. In the archives I received indispensable assistance from Elena Danielson, Linda Bernard, Carol Leadenham, Lora Soroka, David Jacobs, Ron Bulatoff, Zbigniew Stanczyk, Lyalya Kharitonova, Dale Reed and Anatol Shmelev. They went far beyond the demands of their responsibilities, frequently alerting me to material whose existence was unknown to me. Our conversations about the hundreds of boxes in diverse collections were of inestimable assistance.

The fresh material used in the book includes folders from the Trotsky Collection, the Boris Nicolaevsky Collection, the Bertram Wolfe Collection, the sundry records of Politburo and Central Committee for the 1920s, the papers deposited by Trotsky's assistants and followers and the internal records of the nascent Fourth International. The gem in the Hoover Archives is the first draft of Trotsky's autobiography which has much information he excluded from the printed version. Also of importance are the letters from and to Trotsky as well as the unpublished variants of his works and the correspondence and memoirs by his wife Natalya and other members of his family across several generations. The Hoover Institution Archives, moreover, have invaluable sources on Trotsky from the Paris office of the Russian Imperial Okhrana, from Nestor Lakoba's papers and from Dmitri Volkogonov's papers. Most of such material is used for the first time in this biography. I am grateful too to the staff in the Hoover Institution Library for their diligence in delivering rare contemporary books, articles and newspapers.

Other Trotsky archival holdings consulted for the book include those in Amsterdam, Harvard and Moscow. Whereas Amsterdam and Harvard were mined long ago, the seams in Moscow have been open to prospectors only since 1991. Not only Trotsky's personal file and central party records in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (once known as the Central Party Archive) but also the papers from the Russian State Archive of Military History and the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service offer important information. The Houghton Library at Harvard University too contains letters in its holdings which have merited reconsideration, and

I thank Jennie Rathbun for obtaining the ones I requested. SSEES-UCL in London has a number of early editions of Trotsky's books which I was able to consult. My wife Adele Biagi visited the National Archives at Kew in search of documents on Trotsky and discovered several interesting police records.

While writing up the research I benefited from exchanges of opinions with Robert Conquest whose capacious knowledge of episodes in Trotsky's life and times gave me plenty of clues to work with. It was also a pleasure to try out ideas on Paul Gregory, Arnold Beichman, Michael Bernshtam, Norman Naimark and Amir Weiner at Hoover and Stanford and on Yuri Slezkine at Berkeley. Paul's annual Soviet archives working group has become a remarkable annual forum for the discussion of questions about the USSR's past. At Oxford I have benefited over many years from working with Katya Andreyev on the courses we have taught together. The Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre and its Library have provided excellent facilities and I am indebted to Richard Ramage, our Administrator, for securing books even during the disruption when our Library was being reconstructed. The Centre's Monday seminar, which has run for over half a century, has been a fecund source of ideas for this book even when the topics had nothing to do with Trotsky.

My thanks go to Elena Danielson who recounted her conversations with Ella Wolfe, Frida Kahlo's great friend; to Anita Burdman Feferman who knew and wrote about Jean van Heijenoort; to Robin Jacoby whose psychiatric and psychological expertise helped towards an understanding of Trotsky's personality; to Tanya Okunskaya, who provided letters from the Turkmenistan party archives; and to the late Brian Pearce who over many years shared his lifetime of reflections on Trotsky and Trotskyism. Olga Kerziouk and Elena Katz gave their informed verdicts on Trotsky's accent and diction after we listened online to his speeches in Russian. Gabriel Gorodetsky shared with me the pages of Ivan Maiski's diary which mention Trotsky. Bob Davies, the late John Klier, Keith Sidwell, Faith Wigzeil, Mikhail Zilikov and Andrei Zorin offered advice on particular matters. I am grateful to Robert Harris for lending me his pre-revolutionary map of Odessa and to Harun Yilmaz for obtaining and translating Turkish historical literature.

Harry Shukman and Ian Thatcher took appreciable time away from their own work to read the entire manuscript. Harry's historical interests touch on crucial themes in this biography and I am grateful for his deft, tactful steerage away from many crudities in the draft chapters. Ian has spent his career writing about Trotsky; I appreciate his generosity of spirit in scrutinizing my draft and making suggestions. Both Harry and Ian also kindly allowed me to come back to them with further queries. Simon Sebag Montefiore and Paul Gregory read large parts of the draft and sharpened the argument. Both Simon and Paul wear their learning lightly: my thanks go to them for their insights. Hugo Service cast his eye over the Introduction. Above all, Adele has gone through the book twice, assisted in cutting out mistakes and advised on the course of the argument and narrative. I cannot thank her enough for all her insight and patience: we have talked endlessly about the problems of Trotsky's life and, as ever, it is to her that I owe the greatest debt.

My literary agent David Godwin and Macmillan editor Georgina Morley have been as active and encouraging as always; and Peter James has done an excellent job of copy-editing the text with his usual mixture of consultative empathy and incisiveness.

It has been a pleasure to work with all three of them.

This book is the first full-length biography of Trotsky written by someone outside Russia who is not a Trotskyist. There have of course been biographies by writers who either were not Trotskyists or had ceased being such and even become hostile to Trotsky; but in each case they were unduly influenced by the material and analysis offered by Trotsky and his leading post-war apologists. Trotsky himself wrote a vivid set of memoirs in 1930, ten years before he died. His Polish-emigrant follower Isaac Deutscher wrote a trilogy of literary dash in 1954–63 and the French Trotskyist Pierre Broué produced a single-volume study in 1989. Trotsky and Deutscher wrote with brio, and I make no pretence of having matched them in style. But I do contend that Trotsky was selective, evasive and self-aggrandizing in his account and that Deutscher and Broué omitted to ask many of the necessary awkward questions about him. Broué was an idolater; Deutscher, even while believing that the Soviet regime after Stalin could rectify itself and build a humane communist order, worshipped at Trotsky's shrine. Trotsky and Deutscher wrote books which gained a lasting influence far outside the perimeter of the political far left, and their highly disputable judgements have all too often been treated as the last word on the subject. That was how they wanted it. The history of the Russian Revolution deserves a more searching approach and this biography is intended to help in all this.

It would be tedious for everyone if my disagreements with the basic Trotskyist 'line' about Trotsky were to pepper the book's chapters. Over three decades ago, when doing doctoral research on the communist party in the early revolutionary period, I became convinced that Trotsky's diagnosis of the causes of his defeat by Stalin was self-serving and misleading. Several other works on Trotsky have subjected him to sceptical scrutiny. On his tactics in the October seizure of power, Alexander Rabinowitch and James White have made important contributions. On his leadership of the Red Army, Francesco Benvenuti, Evan Mawdsley and Geoff Swain have offered fresh insights. On his economic ideas during the NEP, Richard Day, Bob Davies and John Channon have challenged the old picture. On his China policy in the 1920s, Alexander Pantsov has offered a new analysis. On his activity as revolutionary politician and writer before the October Revolution, Ian Thatcher's studies are fundamental. Two large biographies, by Nikolai Vasetski and Dmitri Volkogonov, have appeared in Russia. Without offering an original interpretation, they have increased the documentary information available.

Time was when Trotsky was a frequent topic of public discussion at least outside the USSR. Those days are gone. But his ideas and activity deserve to be looked at again because they have an importance for the way we understand the past hundred years of Russian and world history. This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Janet Service. Hailing from the Scottish borders, she met our father in wartime Edinburgh before they made the rest of their lives in the English Midlands. For most of her employed life she was a selfless nurse for physically disabled children; she was a superlative cook and knitter and could turn her hands to almost any practical job around the home. She was an exceptional mother for my brother Rod and me and a wonderful grandmother for her six grandchildren.

Robert Service
March 2009

For the paperback edition I have corrected slips in the original. I am grateful to Ali Granmayeh, Geoffrey Hosking and Włodzimierz Szwarc for alerting me to several of them.

January 2010

A Note on Usages

Dates are usually given according to the calendar in official use in the country where Trotsky was living at the time. The Russian authorities employed the Julian calendar until January 1918, when they switched to the Gregorian one. In transliterating from Russian, I have used a simplified version of the US Library of Congress system with the qualification that endnotes are given in line with the full system. The translations of most quotations are mine – Trotsky's own translators did not always serve him well, and anyway it was not the easiest job since he often interfered with their work even when, as was true of English, his grasp of the language was inadequate.

INTRODUCTION

Trotsky moved like a bright comet across the political sky. He first came to global attention in 1917. By all accounts he was the finest orator of the Russian Revolution. He led the Military-Revolutionary Committee which carried out the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October. He did more than anyone to found the Red Army. He belonged to the Party Politburo and had a deep impact on its political, economic and military strategy. He was a principal figure in the early years of the Communist International. The whole world attributed the impact of the October Revolution to his partnership with Lenin. He and Lenin had their difficulties with each other. Before 1917 Trotsky had been an enemy of Bolshevism, and many Bolsheviks did not let him forget it. When Lenin fell mortally ill in 1922, the rest of the Politburo feared that Trotsky would bid to become his sole successor. The subsequent factional struggles brought disaster upon him and he was deported from the USSR in 1929 and given political asylum in Turkey, France, Norway and Mexico. His analysis of what had gone wrong with the Soviet state continued to have an influence abroad. Trotskyist organizations sprang up wherever political conditions allowed. Stalin depicted Trotsky as a traitor to the October Revolution, laid charges against him in the show-trials of 1936–8 and ordered Soviet intelligence agencies to assassinate him. In 1940 they succeeded.

He lived a life full of drama played out with the world as his stage. The October Revolution changed the course of history, and Trotsky had a prominent role in the transformation. Politics on the left were transfigured in every country; socialists had to decide whether to support or oppose what was being undertaken by the Bolsheviks in Russia. The foes of socialism were no less affected. Governments had to devise ways of counteracting the Communist International; and fascist parties on the political far right sprang up to prevent the further spread of revolutionary Marxism.

Trotsky felt pride about his accomplishment in the years of power and strove to justify the revolutionary measures of the Soviet government as well as the violence it deployed. As soon as he was appointed a People's Commissar he wrote commentaries and memoirs which described Bolshevik activity in the warmest colours. His works were distributed widely in the USSR; they were instantly translated and sold abroad in popular editions. For several years he was a best-selling author. About his literary and analytical brilliance there was never a doubt. After he was expelled from the Soviet Union it was only by his prolific writings that he could support himself and his family in reasonable comfort. He was taken seriously not just by anti-communist socialists