INTRODUCTION

Anatomy of a Polemic

Still, through the dust of this dim prose appears
The clash of armies, and the sheen of spears.¹

......

The time was past when Friedrich believed he was waging a personal battle against the world order and its defenders ... Now he possessed an unwritten but internationally recognised right to illegality.²

......

A political struggle is in its essence a struggle of interests and forces, not of arguments.³

......

On 5 May 1920, Leon Trotsky, People's Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs, looked out from the steps of a makeshift tribune across a crowd gathered in front of the Bolshoi Theatre on the newly named Sverdlov Square in Moscow. Vladimir Lenin, chair of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), stood atop the tribune, a dynamic study in dark jacket with cloth cap in hand, his goateed chin thrust forward, addressing the Red Army soldiers destined for the Polish front. Trotsky stood to his left, partially obscuring his brother-in-law, Lev Kamenev, chair of the Moscow Soviet. At one point at that meeting, Trotsky spoke from atop the tribune, this time with Lenin and Kamenev observing from

¹ This epigraph appeared anonymously on the title page of the first English translation of Trotsky's 'The Lessons of October' (Trotsky 1925a). It is from a poem, 'Epistle to Mr. Alexander Pope', by Andrew Lang, a nineteenth-century poet and literary critic. The original 'flight of arrows' in the poem was replaced with 'clash of armies' in the epigraph (Lang 1893, p. 48).
² Roth 1968, p. 123 (Roth's 'Trotsky novel').
³ Trotsky 1972a, pp. 86–7.
the steps.\textsuperscript{4} To the assembled, it would have seemed quite natural to see Trotsky on a par with Lenin. A year before, a poem in the Bolshevik newspaper, \textit{Pravda [Truth]}, had extolled the duo: ‘Friends are easy to recognise / On one road with Lenin and Trotsky I stand firm’.\textsuperscript{5}

At the height of the Civil War, Anatolii Lunacharsky, the first People’s Commissar of Enlightenment of the Soviet state, observed that some people regarded Trotsky as the ‘true leader of the Russian Revolution’, while confiding in the same breath that he, Lunacharsky, was only poorly acquainted with Lenin’s \textit{vita}.\textsuperscript{6} An early biographer saw Trotsky as the very ‘tribune of the revolution’, with a ‘brilliant, lively mind, splendid dialectics, a fiery temperament, strikingly quick wits and a keen intelligence’.\textsuperscript{7} Another described him as ‘the most brilliant, most paradoxical figure among the Bolshevik leaders ... who is able to combine logical argument with beautiful rhetoric which sometimes drips with biting, scathing sarcasm, and sometimes attains genuine pathos’.\textsuperscript{8} On the international stage, Trotsky’s was also a voice to be heeded. One Roger Lévy wrote in 1920 that Trotsky’s ambition had made of him ‘a man alone’, but also one who was ‘always happy to take the stage and amaze the world’.\textsuperscript{9} To Colonel Raymond Robins, official representative of the American Red Cross in Russia in 1918, he was a ‘son of a bitch, but the greatest Jew since Jesus Christ’.\textsuperscript{10} An American journalist mused whether he was ‘the Napoleon whose coming Tolstoi foretold’.\textsuperscript{11} As the scourge of the counter-revolution, Trotsky would have been unperturbed by these characterisations. Still, given his widely acknowledged role in the increasingly iconic October Revolution and the recently victorious Civil War, Trotsky might have permitted himself a measure of prideful self-satisfaction as he looked out over the soldiers in 1920, confident in his place in any future pantheon of Bolshevik heroes.

This revolutionary tableau was featured three years later in a special pictorial issue of the journal \textit{Krasnaia niva [Red Cornfield]} dedicated to the revolutionary role of the Red Army in the Civil War.\textsuperscript{12} As the recent recipient of the Order

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} King 1997, pp. 68–73.
\item \textsuperscript{5} ‘Pravda-Matka. Krasnoarmeiskii rasskaz’, \textit{Pravda}, no. 20, 7 November 1919, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Lunacharskii 1919, p. 78, p. 58.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Ustinov 1920, p. 66.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Smolenskii 1921, p. 9.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Lévy 1920, p. 10, p. 101.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Hale 1961, p. 101.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Suzanne Pekoff, ‘Will Trotzky’s Terrible Cossacks Ruin Europe?’ \textit{Los Angeles Times}, 19 November 1922, p. 37.
\end{itemize}