Chapter Twenty-Nine

Trotsky in Exile

A Review of Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast

Trotsky learning to fish in the Sea of Marmora from an illiterate Greek boy; Trotsky on a ski trip in the Norwegian Arctic; Trotsky feeding the rabbits among the cacti at Coyoacan: images such as these all contribute to the violent sense of dislocation which is produced by turning from the first two volumes of Isaac Deutscher’s biography to the third. But this dislocation is not, of course, merely a matter of place. Trotsky’s physical remoteness from events in the years 1929–40 is only matched by his apparent political isolation. The creator of the Red Army is reduced to the leader of a scattered following of a few hundred militants; the inspirer of the soviets is a stateless exile. Exile, of course, is not necessarily impotence. But the question must be faced. Is Trotsky in exile, like Marx in the British Museum, a commentator who is also an actor, or is he, like Napoleon on St. Helena, an outcast from world of action?

What kind of answer one gives to this question will determine the whole perspective in which one sees Trotsky’s last decade. To understand Deutscher’s

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answer fully, we shall have to look back to his Stalin. Deutscher’s own statement in the preface to the 1961 edition of *Stalin* of the unity of his work on Stalin and Trotsky justifies us in so doing.

‘In attempting to find an historical parallel to Stalin’, wrote Trotsky in 1940, ‘we have to reject not only Cromwell, Robespierre, Napoleon, and Lenin, but even Mussolini and Hitler.’\(^2\) ‘What appears to be established’, wrote Deutscher in his *Stalin* (1949), ‘is that Stalin belongs to the breed of the great revolutionary despots, to which Cromwell, Robespierre, and Napoleon belonged.’\(^3\)

The gap between Deutscher’s judgement and Trotsky’s is a first clue to Deutscher’s standpoint. For Deutscher believes that there is a ‘broad scheme of revolutionary development’ which is ‘common to all great revolutionaries so far’. The first stage is one in which ‘popular energy, impatience, anger and hope’ burst out, and ‘the party that gives the fullest expression to the popular mood outdoes its rivals, gains the confidence of the masses and rises to power’. There follows a second heroic stage of civil war in which revolutionary party and people are so well attuned that the leaders ‘are willing and even eager to submit their policies to open debate and to accept the popular verdict’. This stage is short. Weariness and ruthlessness combine to open a gap between party and people. The party cannot abdicate without sacrificing the basis the revolution has created for social advance and prosperity; but it can no longer listen to – it must indeed in time suppress – the voice of the people. At this point the revolutionary party is split between those who see government by the people as the heart of the revolution and therefore cry that the revolution is betrayed and those who justify the new antidemocratic use of power as the only way to serve the ultimate interests of the people by preserving the gains of the revolution. This story is one that Deutscher supposes can be told of any ‘party of the revolution, whether it be called Independent, Jacobin or Bolshevik’, whether it is English, French or Russian.\(^4\) It is within the framework of this story that Stalin and Trotsky are made to appear as playing out necessary roles. Trotsky, the caretaker of revolutionary purity, is necessarily doomed to political isolation in the period of the anti-democratic conservation of revolutionary gains. The significance of the quotation from

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\(^2\) Trotsky 1947, p. 413.

\(^3\) Deutscher 1966, p. 550.