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Leon Trotsky, more than any other man, was responsible for the successful blend of peasant and proletariat that created the Red army. His theories of revolution were based on winning the army rather than defeating it, and that was a key element in the ultimate victory of the proletariat in October 1917. Trotsky sought to transform the standing army by democratizing the existing force into a "universally armed people" that would fight only in self-defense. The eventual development of his army into a rigidly centralized and disciplined force haunted Trotsky for the rest of his life with fears that it might indeed become another instrument of oppression.

ARMIES AND REVOLUTION: TROTSKY'S PRE-1917 MILITARY THOUGHT

An article prepared

by

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In March 1918, Leon Trotsky assumed the role of Commissar of War in a young Soviet Government that was at once threatened by civil war, foreign invasion, and internal political dissension. While Trotsky was not particularly noted for his military experience—he was a war correspondent during the Balkan (1912-13) and First World Wars—his inexperience, he insisted, was no different from that of politically appointed War Ministers of Western parliamentary democracies. Besides, he argued, he (like Lenin) had a particularly unique understanding of the essential Clausewitzian truth that "the important thing was war as a continuation of politics, and the army as an instrument of battle." Sparked by this interest and experience, he developed a fascination in the psychology of armies and their soldiers,¹ the end product

being an effective military doctrine that has been the cornerstone of the Russian Army ever since.

When the Red army emerged victoriously from the 1918-1920 civil war, Trotsky's military thought, of course, became the subject of study. But surprisingly, little attention was paid to the period before 1918, the years in which he formulated the ideas which later came to such impressive fruition. Since his first task as Commissar of War was the building of the Red army, his views on such matters cannot be ignored.

Yet the handful of existing studies remain either superficial or misdirected

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in their treatment of this early period.² The young Marxist was vitally concerned with the existing army and its *internal* role as a bulwark of the Tsarist regime. Having witnessed its power firsthand during the abortive revolution of 1905, Trotsky naturally gave the military tactics of insurrection a good deal of thought. However, the conclusions he reached, their place in his grand strategy of a Russian revolution, and his views on the nature of the existing army as well as those on the proper military organization for a future socialist state have been largely ignored. And it is these that will concern us here.

Trotsky, like most European socialists in the early 1900's, viewed standing armies as one of the bourgeois, dictatorial state's weapons of imperialism abroad and class exploitation at home. Conscripted isolated young peasants and workers in repressive barracks, where, cut off from their own classes, they were indoctrinated in the interests of the ruling classes and the oppressive state. Thus soldiers were made effective tools against the toilers' efforts to achieve justice. And, since external wars were usually for the imperialist interests of the dominant classes, standing armies were instruments of conquest, not defense, and were in themselves dangers to the peace.

Such themes are reiterated in Trotsky's pre-1917 writings, and the tone of his 1910 May Day message is typical. In this he warned Russian workers that:

as long as there exists a standing army that keeps over a million drill-deafened men under arms, and as long as this army remains a blind and dumb instrument in the hands of the Tsar and his black colleagues, just so long will bloody attacks continue to be launched on oppressed classes and weak nations, and just so long will bloody collisions between states be as inevitable as an explosion

when unstable dynamite is shaken up. . . .³

Trotsky therefore demanded that such armies be abolished. Once a socialist revolution had abolished classes, standing armies would be unnecessary: socialist states would desire no instrument of external conquest, while the internal order could be maintained by a militia. This same militia, firmly based on the idea of a "universally armed people," would be more than sufficient to meet the needs of self-defense.

Socialists argued that such a force would be a real "nation in arms," inspired by the ideal of its own rightful defense of its own interests. Thus the armed citizenry, merged in its own armed force the militia—would be an awesome foe, and an external enemy would abandon an invasion as profitless. In the same May Day message, Trotsky wrote: "A free people do not need specialists in murder—it will defend its own liberty and its own rights with its own armed hand!"⁴

Thus far Trotsky's views differ little from those of his fellow Marxists. For the radical left this militia policy was only one aspect of a general policy aimed at destroying the old oppressive state machine, but even the more moderate Social Democrats, such as the German leader August Bebel and the fiery French orator Jean Jaurès, saw a militia as being one possible guarantee of international peace. The latter argued in his influential work *L'Armée Nouvelle* that a militia could be introduced even without a revolution in a bourgeois, democratic state.⁵ According to Karl Radek, Trotsky was greatly impressed by this work but saw as illusory Jaurès' hopes that this could be achieved without a revolution.⁶ Like Lenin, Trotsky was convinced that only an international socialist revolution could guarantee international peace and an internal socialist system.

The concept of destroying the old state machine was much less theoretical

for Trotsky than it was for his European colleagues. Before 1917 Lenin generally directed his party from afar or, at best, only from the fringes of real action. But in 1905 Trotsky, as the leading member of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies, had been a firsthand witness to the very real power of the existing state machine and its army. On 9 January 1905, the "first Russian revolution" began in St. Petersburg when a demonstration of unarmed workers, led by a priest, was fired on by troops. This "Bloody Sunday massacre" resulted in strikes and anti-Government demonstrations. Russian socialists abroad believed that their day had finally dawned. Rushing to libraries, they hurriedly studied the tactics of street fighting and prepared to return for the final battles.

Trotsky, like his colleagues, was exhilarated, and, in an article on these events published at the end of January, gave the Russian workers his first tactical advice. Their unarmed heroism on "Bloody Sunday" had, he pointed out, proved helpless against the armed idiocy of the barracks. Now they must turn their attention to securing arms. Here the revolutionaries' clandestine arsenals and the weapons looted from stores could be of some help, but Trotsky realized these sources would not in themselves be sufficient. In the last resort, only the state arsenals possessed enough weapons for the arming of the people. However, these were also guarded by the very soldiers against whom the workers intended to use the arms. In order to obtain arms, the workers must again overcome the opposition of the army. Thus, a collision between the unarmed people and the army was inevitable.

Trotsky believed that this situation would in itself resolve the problem. While he saw some merit in actual street combat, he felt the unarmed revolutionary people should, on the occasion of such collisions, use the barricades, appeals, speeches, and so on, as a means

of winning over units of the army. This accomplished, arms would have been acquired, but more important still, the process of "further arming of the people and the 'democratization' of the troops" would, once begun, continue irresistibly. In this way, he implied, the socialists' dream of an "armed people" could be achieved.⁷

In July he repeated his theme of 1 May, stressing that the citizens must begin to form their own militias, with elected officers in both town and countryside. He argued that, "this was a question of life and death and it must be resolved," for only "*the armed hands of the citizens*" could preserve the rights won and a people's government from the inevitable "... re-actionary efforts aimed at restoring all of the old ways."⁸ Nevertheless, during the spring and summer, as well as during the October strike, he did not forget the importance of winning over the soldiers. The revolt on the battleship *Potemkin* in June elated him. Announcing that "a new day has begun in Russia" he called on the soldiers to see the country as one large battleship and, following the example of the Black Sea sailors, join the people.⁹

By winter, however, this euphoria had vanished. The Tsarist army and navy had been rife with discontent, but the old discipline had proved stronger and the army more difficult to win than Trotsky had expected. Despite the heroism of the workers and isolated events like the *Potemkin* mutiny, his "irresistible" chain reaction had failed to materialize. By December the October strike was broken, the Petrograd Soviet (including Trotsky) arrested, and the armed workers of Moscow defeated in bloody street battles with the Semenovsky Guards.

During the next several years Trotsky pondered the lessons of 1905. During his trial, in early October 1906, he boldly outlined some of his conclusions before the court. Here he repeated his

advice of January 1905 and stressed that for a successful insurrection, the "first requisite was to bring the army over to our side. To force the soldiers to recognize the shameful role they were playing, to persuade them to work with the people and for the people--this was the first task we set ourselves."¹⁰

Trotsky also pointed out that success was not strictly a matter of obtaining weapons: "if the masses possessed machine guns and rifles. . . this would largely remove the inevitability of an insurrection. The undecided army would lay down its arms at the feet of the armed people." But even unarmed, the masses possessed a great weapon—a moral weapon—their readiness to die. For, he told the court:

When the soldiers are sent out into the streets to repress the masses and discover that this crowd, the *people* . . . have come out to fight in earnest, to the end—then the soldiers' hearts will falter, as they have always done in all revolutions, for they will be forced to doubt the stability of the order which they serve, they will be forced to believe in the triumph of the people.¹¹

Although much of the speech was an exercise in propaganda, Trotsky developed the same ideas in his book *1905* published in Germany in 1908. He warned repeatedly that "all state power rests on its material forces and, above all, on the army. The army stands in the way of a real, as opposed to a paper, revolution."¹² So, "at a certain moment in revolution the critical question becomes: on which sides are the soldiers—their sympathies and their bayonets?"¹³

Trotsky then believed there could "be no question of a purely military victory." True, technical considerations would play a part in any armed conflict, and the communications and transportation system might seem to favor governments, but he shrewdly noted that these

could be paralyzed by a general strike. Similarly, once the army was won over, "the most modern weapons of militarism" would be found "not only in the hands of the government but also in the service of the revolution."¹⁴

The same was true of the time-honored techniques employed by the revolutionaries. In 1906, for instance, he told the court that "barricades may loom too large in our notions of a popular rising." He emphasized that it must not be forgotten that such a mechanical element plays a *moral* role and was only useful inasmuch as it brought the soldiers into closer contact with the people. Echoing his advice of January 1905, Trotsky maintained that at the barricades the soldier hears—perhaps for the first time in his life—the talk of ordinary, honest people, their fraternal appeals, the voice of the people's conscience, and he hoped the result would be that military discipline disintegrates and disappears.¹⁵

In 1905 Trotsky makes the same point with regard to guerrilla fighting. He did not, of course, deny the utility of arming the workers, but the December 1905 rising in Moscow had demonstrated that their action, even when combined with a revolutionary strike, "cannot in itself . . . lead to victory." Guerrilla tactics could "sound the mood of the army" and demonstrate the people's determination, but real victory would come only when a "guerrilla struggle can be transformed into a mass struggle in which a part of the troops, supported by the armed and unarmed population, will fight another part, which will find itself in a ring of universal hatred."¹⁶

The insurrectionary battle, then, was not so much a struggle against the army, but for the army, and all the revolutionaries' tactics should be directed toward achieving this end.¹⁷ On this point, Trotsky differed from Lenin, who, although he recognized the usefulness of winning over segments of the

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armed forces, still wrote mainly about the street tactics of the armed workers.¹⁸

Trotsky argued that the insurrectionary people, armed and unarmed, must undermine the army's faith, and in 1905 he again stressed the importance of this collision of the people with soldiers. The army must be convinced that the crowd is not merely demonstrating or protesting, but is actually fighting for power and has a chance of winning. Agitation, guerrilla and street warfare, and barricades could only help, for the people's chief weapon in overcoming "the inertia of the army" is its willingness to "pile corpses upon corpses." It was this that made it "psychologically possible for them (i.e., the soldiers) to cross over to the side of the people," thus creating a true armed people.¹⁹

Trotsky had already prepared a detailed program of objectives for future revolutionaries. The next Soviet, he wrote, need not make the mistake of 1905; and instead, should seek immediately to realize the

revolutionary co-operation with the army, the peasantry, and the plebeian segments of the middle classes; the abolition of the autocracy; the destruction of the autocracy's military machine; the partial disbanding and the partial reorganization of army; the abolition of the police and the bureaucratic machine; an eight hour working day; the arming of the people, and especially of the workers; the transformation of the Soviets into organs of revolutionary, urban self-government; the formation of peasant soviets to take on the spot control of the agrarian revolution; and, elections to the Constituent Assembly²⁰

This program placed Trotsky's tactical injunctions on the army in the larger Marxist context of insurrectionary

politics. It is significant that the army itself—as opposed to the military administrative bureaucracy—is not to be totally destroyed. The new form contemplated is undoubtedly a militia system (with, perhaps, a small core of cadres for training and so on), for otherwise Trotsky's demand for an armed people would have little meaning.

He advocated, therefore, the winning, using, and reorganization of the army by the revolutionaries as an essential part of the revolution and new social system that was, as early as 1906, conceived of as a decentralized regime of local urban and rural Soviets. However, this program brought him up against the larger strategic problem of the Russian revolution. Given universal conscription, the modern standing army would reflect the social composition of the state. Thus, in the moment of confrontation between army and people, "the result of the confrontation [at the end of 1905] depended on the behavior of the army, and the behavior of the army on its class composition."²¹

In Russia it was the peasantry, the overwhelming mass of the population, that provided the majority of the soldiers. It was their loyalty that had preserved the regime. As Trotsky wrote, the "proletariat was defeated in the insurrection of December and January (1905-1906), not by its own mistakes, but by a more real quantity: the bayonets of the peasant army."²² In fact, he argued, an analysis of the military microcosm doomed the 1905 revolution. The revolutionaries within the armed forces were "not the grey illiterates of the infantry, but skilled, highly literate, technically trained soldiers." As a good Marxist, he explained in terms of social or class origins that the vast majority of infantry soldiers were young peasants, whereas the engineers and gunners were recruited chiefly from among industrial workers.

Russia's social composition guaran-

teed that the workers - who carried their class advantages with them to the barracks, that is their intelligence, technical training, resoluteness, ability for concerted action - would be a minority in her army. The peasants on the other hand, contributed the overwhelming numerical strength and the army, by universal conscription, ensured that the passivity of the peasant would be an irreplaceable virtue.^{2,3}

Therefore, just as proletarian masses of Petersburg and Moscow had been defeated by the peasant soldiers, the proletarian soldiers' revolutionary action within the army encountered its greatest obstacle in the backwardness and distrustful passivity of the peasant soldier. Trotsky saw friction between the proletarian minority and the peasant majority as being characteristic of all our military risings, paralyzing them and robbing them of power. This was because the peasants in the army, like those in the villages, "are always inclined to adopt wait-and-see tactics, and at the enemy's first decisive attack they abandon the mutineers and allow themselves once more to be placed under the disciplinary yoke."^{2,4}

Here Trotsky's military analysis of the problem of the army in a revolution reflected his larger consideration of strategy in a predominantly peasant society. In his important *Itogi i perspektivy* (Conclusions and Prospects) of 1906 he stressed that the proletariat had to gain the peasantry's support in order to hold power. If the immediate tactical aim of the insurrectionary masses must be the winning of and merging with the peasant soldiers, the proletariat as a whole must gain the backing of the country's peasant masses. As the workers in the army provided the revolutionary initiative, so the workers as a whole must serve as the core and provide the initiative for the establishing of a revolutionary proletarian government that, ruling in the interest of the masses, would enjoy their overwhelming sup-

port. In 1905 Trotsky believed it was the tardy development of such support that allowed the urban proletariat to be defeated and then left the peasantry helpless.^{2,5}

Further, since the problem was the same within the army, on the city streets, and in the country as a whole, Trotsky found an answer that united the tactics of insurrection with the strategy of revolution. On the streets, as indicated above, a demonstration of the people's resolution would be decisive, and in the army, the proletarian soldiers must show the same qualities. "Attack," he wrote, "is the only proper method for military risings: attack without any interruptions that might engender hesitation and disorder." Only this kind of resolute action would involve the peasant soldiers and give them no time for hesitation or withdrawal.^{2,6}

At the level of national revolution, Trotsky converted these tactical precepts into a general strategical imperative. "Slogans," he warned, "such as the confiscation of lands, etc., are useless in themselves." The proletariat must learn that "the only way for it to attract the mass of small rural proprietors is to show energy and determination in the struggle for power. The weak are drawn to the strong."^{2,7} So, at the strategic level, "to organize the countryside and bind it to itself; to establish close links with the army; to arm itself: those were the great and simple conclusions which the October struggle (of 1905) . . . dictated to the proletariat."^{2,8}

The experiences of 1905 had brought home to Trotsky the full importance of the peasantry's role in the revolution. In the years that followed, his views changed little. At a strategic level peasant support remained a necessity, and tactically the army, containing masses of these same peasants, must be won over to the insurrection. He correctly sensed that the armed forces were, after 1905, no longer reliable instruments of Tsarist foreign policy; the best officers

had either resigned or been driven from their posts, while the proletarians—the most valuable part, in the military sense, of a contemporary army—were usually unwilling to serve and sometimes even conscious and irreconcilable enemies of the government. The mass of the soldiery, however, were still cowed and ignorant peasants, who not only submerged the proletariat within the ranks and inhibited the worker-soldiers' revolutionary energy, but generally lowered the army's combat effectiveness.²⁹

The defeats suffered by Tsarist Russia in 1914-1915 seemed to confirm for Trotsky the correctness of this analysis.³⁰ Similarly, the events of the revolution of February-March, 1917 apparently proved the value of the tactical directives he had worked out a decade before. The unarmed workers had, by their heroic willingness to die, won over the Petrograd garrison and successfully brought down the regime. Now it seemed necessary to move the struggle to the higher, strategical level.

In any case Trotsky, preparing to leave New York for Russia, outlined a program that contained all his earlier ideas. Writing in *Novy Mir* (New World) in March 1917, he argued that the Petrograd garrison, by joining the people, had made victory possible and so were the first representatives of the revolutionary army. And here, he warned, "are they to whom the decisive word in the events of the revolution belongs!"³¹

Several days later he again discussed the army. Warning that the promised Constituent Assembly would reflect the interests of those calling it, he maintained that only a revolutionary workers' government possesses the will and ability to see that the Constituent Assembly carried out a truly radical program. Here again were all the essential elements of his 1906 proposals, and again, the army was not to be destroyed but rebuilt from top to bottom, and transformed into a revolutionary militia.

These and other measures, along with land reform, were once more a part of "demonstrating to the lower strata of the peasantry that their salvation lies only in supporting a revolutionary workers' regime."³²

Writing in *Novy Mir* he again returned to these issues, stressing this time that the land question would "play a great role in uniting the proletarian cadres of the army with its peasants masses." Combined with agitation among the soldiers against the "Imperialist War," he predicted that this issue would condition the speed with which a Revolutionary Workers' Government, relying directly on the proletariat and their allies in the lower strata of the countryside, could be established. And, in the unlikely eventuality that the success of the Russian masses did not provoke a similar revolution in Germany, the Russian workers would then, of course, defend its revolution with weapons in hand. Bolstered by events such as the meeting of French troops on the Western front, neither Trotsky nor Lenin admitted whatever doubts they may have had about the imminence of a European-wide revolution.³³

Such were the policies Trotsky pursued during the next 7 months. The army, greatly swollen by wartime conscription, proved a good place to begin organizing the universally armed people, as well as an ideal milieu in which masses of soldier peasants could be indoctrinated. Compared to Lenin, Trotsky spoke little about tearing down the old state apparatus and the necessity of arming the people. Before October his attention was fixed rather on the front, on the success of efforts to democratize the existing army, and, to transform, not destroy it. Trotsky saw this as an essential element of his greater design for building an alliance between workers and the poorer peasantry.³⁴

Apart from affecting the interpretation of Trotsky's behavior and actions in 1917, a correct understanding of his

prior military thought has implications for his later career. It is clear, for instance, that the man who in 1905 had seen the vital importance of forging a proletarian-peasant alliance and who later supervised the building of the Workers' and Peasants' Red army can hardly have been guilty of having underestimated the peasantry's importance, as later Communist writers have charged.³⁵

More important are the implications for his later military thought. The fact that his Red army became a rigidly centralized and disciplined standing body has seemed to some a departure from his earlier beliefs. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest that in the spring of 1918, finding the revolution threatened by external and internal opponents and that the old, crumbling army had been incapable of any transformation, he accepted a standing Red army as an *interim* proposal. Nevertheless, even then he long insisted that the

party remain committed to the eventual "transformation" of this new army into a militia. For the rest of his life Trotsky was haunted by fears that his army might indeed become only another standing force, an instrument of oppression.³⁶

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



David R. Jones was educated at the University of Dalhousie, Halifax, Nova Scotia; at Duke University; and at Oxford University. He is a member of the Humanities Association of Canada national executive, military editor for the journal *Soviet Union*, and has published in various professional journals. Mr. Jones is presently a freelance writer and lecturer, is currently working on a book concerning the formation of the Soviet command cadres during the 1918-1920 civil war, and is an Associate of the Naval War College Department of Advanced Research.

NOTES

1. Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp. 348-349. His writings as a war correspondent are found in Leon Trotsky, *Sochineniia* (Collected Works) (Moscow: 1925-1972) vols. VI and IX.

2. Typical treatments are Isaac Deutscher's, *The Prophet Armed. Trotsky: 1879-1921* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 477-478; and Karl Radek, "The Organizer of Victory," an article originally published in *Pravda* in 1923 and reprinted in L. Trotsky, *Military Writings* (New York: n.p., 1969), pp. 11-18. This volume, incidentally, contains only post-1918 writings.

The only full-scale study of Trotsky's military thought is N.M. Heyman, "Leon Trotsky as a Military Thinker," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, Calif.: 1972. Dr. Heyman devotes some 140 pages to the early period, but because of his desire to prove Trotsky's appreciation of the virtues of professional armies, his views are too narrowly focused on the purely "military" elements of Trotsky's writings.

3. Trotsky, *Sochineniia*, vol. IV, p. 409. For similar views see also pp. 258-59, 278, 429, 456-57, and 461. For Lenin's views on this and other topics, see the relevant sections of his military writings, conveniently collected in V.I. Lenin, *o voine, armii i voennoi nauke* (On War, Revolution, and Military Science), 2 vols. (Moscow: 1975). The fullest study of specialist attitudes to the army is R. Hohn, *Sozialismus und Heer* (Socialism and the Army), 3 vols. (Berlin: n.p., 1957-1959).

4. Trotsky, *Sochineniia*, vol. IV, p. 409.

5. See A. Bebel, *Nicht stehendes Heer, sondern Volkswehr!* (Not a Standing Army but an Armed People), (Stuttgart: n.p., 1898); and J. Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle* (The New Army) (Paris: n.p., 1911).

6. Radek, p. 12; and Deutscher, p. 477. For Trotsky's attitude to Jaurès see *Sochineniia*, vol. VIII, pp. 20-32; vol. IX, pp. 9-11.

7. Trotsky, *Sochineniia*, vol. II, 1, pp. 59-60. For his advice on street fighting, see p. 63.