

Destroyed 1923 pamphlet on Red Army, commissioned by Trotsky, reprinted in Russia

By Clara Weiss
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Prikaz No. 279 Revvoensovieta "K piatiletiiu Krasnoi Armii". S illiustratsiiami Yurii Annenkova. Unichtozhennoe izdanie 1923 goda. Reprint. Portrety. Vospominaniia, Statiia i kommentarii I. V. Obukhova-Zieli'ska, red: A. A. Rossomakhin, Sankt-Peterburg 2019.

Several weeks ago, the first-ever reprint of an extremely rare pamphlet appeared in Russia: "Order No. 279: On the Fifth Anniversary of the Red Army," issued by the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensovet), which was then headed by Leon Trotsky, with illustrations by the Russian futurist painter Yuri Annenkov.

The reprint of the pamphlet is accompanied by a volume that includes an essay by the late Russian-Polish art historian Irina Obuchowa-Zieli'ska, who unfortunately passed away last year, as well as the recollections of Trotsky and this period by Annenkov. The volume also includes dozens of pictures, some of which have never been printed before.

The republication of this pamphlet is a significant event. It makes available after almost 100 years an important historical document whose fate reflects the violent repression by Stalinism of genuine Marxist thought and politics, represented within the Soviet Union by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Like countless documents associated with the name of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, it was destroyed by the Stalinists, with only a handful of copies remaining in the world today. (One of the last remaining original editions of Order No. 279 was sold for 1,750,000 rubles, the equivalent of \$27,805, in late 2018.)

Explaining the motivation for the publication of this pamphlet, Obuchowa-Zieli'ska notes: "The history of the USSR still includes many mysteries. Too many documents and publications were destroyed, too many people died prematurely without leaving testimonies about their activity. The resurrection of many facts and the formation, on this basis, of a conception of our recent (in a historical sense) past requires stubborn research and a careful study of what has been preserved. I would like to think that the given publication will serve as a contribution to the process of the recognition and the erasure of 'blank spots' in the history of the early Soviet period."

These "blank spots" are a direct result of the Stalinist oppression of the Left Opposition. As Obuchowa-Zieli'ska points out in her essay on the history of this pamphlet: "The mass confiscation of editions from libraries that were associated with the name of Leon Trotsky and other members of the 'left opposition,' which was conducted in the late 1920s and especially during the 1930s, led to a situation where books and agitational pamphlets of an educational or just a practical business character were turned into bibliographical rarities. In many cases both the workers in institutions and the owners of private libraries simply burned them, trying to avoid any trouble."

An unknown number of documents and dozens, if not hundreds, of books authored by Left Oppositionists, comprising thousands of pages, have survived, if at all, only in a handful of editions, and remain largely unknown and unstudied to this day.

The history of the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensovet) in the Civil War period has been particularly under-researched. Like few other institutions of the early Soviet government, it was linked to the name of Trotsky, who founded and led it until 1925, as well as to many of the leading Left Oppositionists of the 1920s, including Nikolai Ivanovich Muralov, Ivar Tenisovich Smilga, Ephraim Markovich Sklyansky and many others. Almost all of its members were shot during the Great Terror of 1936-1938.

"Trotsky was denounced in all sharps and flats, after which his name became simply taboo, as was the case with the names of many other members of the Revvoensovet, and the institution itself," writes Obuchowa-Zieli'ska. It was not until 1991, just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, that the first book with biographical essays of all members of the Revvoensovet appeared in Russian.

The pamphlet that has now been reprinted was produced as part of the efforts to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Red Army. The Civil War, triggered by the intervention of 19 foreign armies to overthrow the Bolshevik government that had come to power in the October 1917 Revolution, had just ended. Of the 5.3 million men who had been mobilized, only 600,000 remained in the standing army, and the Soviet state proceeded to implement a militia system. The war had claimed millions of lives, not least due to starvation, and had been accompanied by enormous destruction and suffering. Describing the tremendous hardship caused by the war, Order No. 279 of the Revvoensovet said:

The years of struggle and glory were also at the same time years of want and hardship. Despite the fact that the half-starved workers in the military industry gave all they had to the cause of providing for the Red fighters, there were shortages of everything, from bread to bullets. The troops who had already been celebrated for their victories were walking without boots. Positions that had been conquered with blood often had to be given up because there was nothing with which to respond to the shots fired by the enemy. Only the endurance and self-sacrifice of the revolutionary fighters made the struggle possible. Only the support of the toiling masses guaranteed victory.

The Order concludes with a call on the workers to prepare, based on the lessons of the previous years, for the coming struggles and potential assaults of imperialism. It is, as were all writings of the major military commanders of that period, firmly based on the perspective of world socialist revolution.

The revolutionary communist party grows everywhere. But the

bourgeoisie will nowhere give in without a cruel fight. It will rather destroy the entire world than renounce its profits. The exploiters look with hatred at the only country where the working class rules. Soviet Russia is the fortress of world revolution... World capital still refuses to recognize the Soviet republic in the sixth year of its existence. It still hopes to find a better moment to deal it a devastating blow. This is why the Red Army today needs working Russia and the world revolution no less than it did at the moment when Soviet power first came into being. Young fighters! The five preceding years will be for you a school of great heroism. Learn from the past, prepare for the future... Learn! Become stronger! Mature! Prepare!

The pamphlet was signed by Trotsky; his deputy at the Revvoensovet, Ephraim Sklyansky; the commander-in-chief Sergey Kamenev; and three more members of the Revvoensovet: Stepan Danilov, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko and Pavel Lebedev, a former member of the Tsarist army who had joined the ranks of the revolutionary army.

As Obuchowa-Zielińska explains, it was largely owing to these signatories that the pamphlet was destroyed by the Stalinists. Trotsky's name in the USSR became virtually a taboo after the expulsion of the Left Opposition in 1927 and his expulsion from the USSR in 1929. The "struggle against Trotskyism," in Obuchowa-Zielińska's words, assumed "forms of social paranoia: they are looking for 'encoded' pictures of Trotsky in vignettes on school notebooks, those guilty of printing his picture in newspapers are shot. The slightest connection with Trotsky is treated like the most horrible crime, and he disappears almost completely from much of the official history of the USSR."

Ephraim Sklyansky was one of Trotsky's closest collaborators and was among the first to be attacked and removed from his earlier positions in the struggle against the Left Opposition. He died a premature and suspicious death by drowning in a lake in Connecticut, in the US, in 1925. Sergey Kamenev worked closely with Trotsky during the Civil War and continued to advance in the ranks of the Soviet military until well into the 1930s. He died in 1936 of heart failure, but was posthumously accused of participating in a "military-fascist plot" during the Great Purges.

Stepan Stepanovich Danilov had been a revolutionary since the 1890s and a Bolshevik since 1904. During the Civil War, he was close to both Lenin and Trotsky. In 1930, he was expelled from the party as a "Trotskyist." He was sentenced to death in 1937 and died in a camp shortly thereafter.

Vladimir Aleksandrovich Antonov-Ovseenko was legendary as the organizer of several uprisings during the 1905 revolution and helped organize both the July insurrection and the seizure of power in Petrograd in October 1917. He later capitulated to Stalinism, but was also arrested in 1937 and shot in 1938.

Pavel Lebedev was the only one to escape repression. He died a natural death in 1933.

When the pamphlet was produced, in 1923, Trotsky found himself at the "height of his power and popularity," the historian notes. On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the Red Army, his portraits were hanging across cities of the Soviet Union. Gatchina, a small town close to what was then still Petrograd (later Leningrad and today St. Petersburg), was named "Trotsk" in his honor.

The illustration of the pamphlet itself was a byproduct—and a rather spontaneous one—of a much bigger project: the Revvoensovet commissioned from the futurist painter Yuri Annenkov portraits of Trotsky and several other leaders of the revolution and the Civil War, for an exhibition on the Red Army. This exhibition was held in the fall of 1923 at the Museum of the Red Army and Fleet in Moscow. The portraits were also exhibited at the Biennale in Venice in 1924.

The portrait of Trotsky has since become very well known. The other

portraits, many of which are lesser known, are reprinted in the volume. They include Nikolai Muralov (1877-1937), Ephraim Sklyansky (1892-1925), Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko (1883-1938), Karl Radek (1885-1938), Grigory Zinoviev (1883-1936), Mikhail Tukhachevsky (1893-1937), Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), and Kliment Voroshilov (1881-1961).

In 1925, Annenkov also drew a portrait of Vyacheslav Polonsky, who, as the head of the editorial and publishing commission of the Red Army, had been the one to formally commission Annenkov's works in 1923. Throughout the 1920s, Polonsky was, along with the Trotskyist literary critic Alexander Voronsky, one of the leading literary publishers in the Soviet Union.

He worked on the editorial boards of journals such as *Novyi mir* (*New World*) and *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* (*Press and Revolution*). With the exception of the portrait of Voroshilov, who became an important Stalinist and survived the purges, virtually all of these pictures were banned in the Soviet Union. When historical materials started to be slowly republished during the second half of the 1980s, Obuchowa-Zielińska notes, it became clear that almost no one in the Soviet Union knew what Trotsky had looked like.

Apart from Obuchowa-Zielińska's essay, the volume also includes the memoirs of Annenkov about his work for the Revvoensovet and his meetings with Trotsky, written in the 1960s. They are an important historical document about this period and about Leon Trotsky in particular, for whom Annenkov felt great admiration and respect. Annenkov spent many hours with Trotsky to make his portrait. He was to leave the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s for Paris, where he remained in touch with Christian Rakovsky and Leonid Krasin, both important members of the Left Opposition, as well as the French-Russian socialist and opponent of Stalinism, Boris Souvarine.

Describing his first meeting with Trotsky, Annenkov wrote:

We sat down. Trotsky started to talk about art. But—not about Russian artists. He spoke about the "Parisian school," and the French fine arts in general. He mentioned the names of Matisse, Derain, Picasso, but increasingly shifted toward a deeper discussion of history.

Particularly interesting to me were the rather barbed remarks by Trotsky that the French Revolution had never found a reflection in art... "Portraits, landscape, still life, interior, love, everyday life, war, historical events, parties, grief, tragedy, even madness (let's just remember 'Portrait of an Insane Person' by Géricault)—all of this has found a reflection in the fine arts. But the revolution and the arts—this union has so far not been found."

I objected to Trotsky that the revolution in the arts is above all a revolution in the forms of its expression. "You are right"—responded Trotsky—but this is a local revolution, a revolution of the arts itself, and one, at that, which is closed, not accessible to the general viewer. But I am talking about the reflection of the general, human revolution in the so called 'fine' arts, which have existed for thousands of years... The paintings that are now produced by Soviet painters that seek to 'depict' the spontaneity of the revolution, the revolutionary pathos, are miserably unworthy not only of the revolution but of the arts themselves..."

Further on, he recounts:

One day, when I worked until a relatively late hour, Trotsky offered to allow me to sleep over at his "headquarters." I accepted...

After reading a newspaper to fall asleep, I turned off the lamp and dozed off, but through my drowsiness I suddenly heard an indeterminate, muffled [zatushevannyi] sound. I opened my eyes and saw that Trotsky, a small flashlight in hand, had entered the room and approached the desk. He tried to not make any noise that could wake me. But to tiptoe “on his toes” like a ballerina was unusual for him and he lost his balance, wavered, balancing with his arms and, with difficulty, made one step after another. Having taken some documents from the desk, Trotsky looked at me: my eyes were hardly open and I maintained the look of someone who is sleeping. Trotsky with the same difficulty and effort tiptoed out of the room and quietly closed the door. You had to live under the conditions of those years in Russia to grasp how unexpected such delicacy was from the leader of the Red Army and “permanent” revolution.

Annenkov also befriended Sklyansky, “Trotsky’s right-hand man.” He quoted from Trotsky’s *My Life* to describe this extraordinary young revolutionary:

Among the party workers at the war commissariat I found the army doctor Sklyansky. In spite of his youth (in 1918 he was barely 26) he was conspicuous for his businesslike methods, his industry, and his talent for appraising people and circumstances—in other words, for the qualities that make an administrator. After consulting Sverdlov, who was invaluable in such matters, I chose Sklyansky as my deputy. I never had any occasion to regret it afterward... If anyone could be compared with Lazare Carnot of the French Revolution [known as the “Organizer of Victory” in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, CW], it is Sklyansky. He was always exact, indefatigable, alert, and well-informed... One could call him at two or three in the morning and find him still at his desk in the commissariat. “When do you sleep?” I would ask him. He would reply with a jest.

Annenkov added that, “Apart from the above enumerated qualities, Sklyansky was a charming comrade and a very cultivated man who loved the arts; despite his being overworked, he never missed an exhibition, not one premiere of a theater or a concert.”

The pamphlet and the memoirs by Annenkov illustrate quite powerfully the influence, respect and popularity that Trotsky and many future Left Oppositionists commanded in the early years after the Revolution and on the very eve of the inner-party struggle.

However, while this volume provides important material and a strong sense of the dramatic changes in the political situation that took place in the Soviet Union within just a few months, from the fall of 1923 to the spring of 1924, the political content and causes of these changes are not explained. Though Obuchowa-Zielińska’s *essay* testifies to her respect for Trotsky and his struggle against Stalinism and her commitment to restoring historical truth, she cannot explain either its political basis or its development and outcome.

The enormous rapidity and intensity with which the emergence of Stalinism and its struggle against Trotskyism developed cannot be understood outside of the impact of the aborted German revolution in the fall of 1923—a revolution that had been widely expected to be successful and had prompted upward of one million Soviet men to sign up voluntarily for the Red Army so that they could rush to the aid of the “Red October” after the seizure of power by the German working class. The incorrect line pursued by the Comintern in Germany under the heavy influence of the emerging Stalin faction, along with their incorrect

policies on domestic economic and political matters, prompted the formation of the Left Opposition, beginning with the *Declaration of the 46* in October of 1923.

To isolate Trotsky and his supporters, Joseph Stalin, working closely with Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, formed the so called “troika” in the Politburo of the party. Their assault on Trotsky was facilitated by Lenin’s death in early 1924. More open attacks on Trotsky started in the fall of 1924, just a few months after the events described in this book, with the so called “literary discussion” about Trotsky’s *Lessons of October*, in which he reviewed the inner-party opposition to the seizure of power in 1917, in an open comparison to the mistaken line taken by the Comintern with regard to Germany in 1923.

The attacks on Trotsky centered on the theory of permanent revolution, the theoretical expression of the program of world socialist revolution, which had formed the basis of the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in 1917. The reaction against this program by substantial sections of the party leadership, led by Stalin, under the banner of the nationalist program of “socialism in one country,” gave expression to the social and political interests of a bureaucracy that had been growing in the workers’ state under conditions of a backward economy with an overwhelmingly peasant population and an unexpectedly prolonged period of international isolation and imperialist encirclement.

Obuchowa-Zielińska writes that Trotsky and other Left Oppositionists remained members of the party’s Central Committee because of the “inertia” of the Stalin faction, and that most “ordinary Soviet citizens” did not understand the scale of the fundamental changes that were taking place in the leadership of the country.

As a matter of fact, however, the outcome of the struggle had not been decided yet. Throughout the 1920s, the Left Opposition and Trotsky remained an embattled and suppressed, but significant, political force in Soviet political, economic and cultural life. Under these conditions, and given their enormous record of struggle and prestige among broad sections of the working class and intelligentsia, it was anything but easy for the Stalin faction to remove Left Oppositionists from influential positions altogether, despite the most horrendous denunciations of them and suppression of any opposition discussion about the political issues at hand.

At leading educational institutions such as the Institute of Red Professors, which trained academics and Marxist theoreticians under the direct supervision of the Central Committee, Left Oppositionists maintained influential positions and support among students until 1925. In the Komsomol, the youth organization of the party, the Left Opposition was particularly strong. When a revolutionary movement of the Chinese peasants and workers erupted in 1925, the influence of the Left Opposition momentarily grew significantly, among both industrial workers and sections of the intelligentsia.

The growing isolation of the Trotskyists and crackdown by the Stalinist faction in late 1927 were bound up with new defeats of the world revolution, above all, the defeat of the British General Strike in 1926 and the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1925-1927—both the results of the opportunist policies of the Stalinized Comintern. When the line of the Comintern in Germany enabled Hitler to come to power in Germany in 1933 without a single shot being fired, and without any discussion in the Comintern itself of its disastrous policies, the International Left Opposition proceeded to call for the formation of the Fourth International, which was eventually founded in 1938 in Paris.

Despite the lack of a political understanding of these fundamental historical questions, the fact that volumes such as this are being published now, under conditions where the Russian state has unleashed, yet again, a vicious campaign against Trotsky, is extremely significant.

It comes one-and-a-half years after hitherto unknown manuscripts of Left Oppositionists imprisoned in the Verkhne-Uralsk political isolator

were uncovered and published in Russia, finding a readership of tens of thousands of people. In recent months, several new books addressing the work of the revolutionary literary critics Alexander Voronsky and Vyacheslav Polonsky in a serious manner have appeared.

Voronsky's semi-fictionalized memoirs, *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodi* [literally: *In Search of Living and Dead Water*, often translated into English as *Waters of Life and Death*] were republished just a few months ago. The book has found a significant readership, becoming one of the best-selling books in a well-known Moscow bookstore. Taken together, these publications point to a very welcome change in the attitude toward the critical question of the historical truth about Trotsky and the Left Opposition within an important section of the intelligentsia and working class in Russia and Eastern Europe more broadly.

The Russian volume can be ordered here.

The Russian edition of In Defense of Leon Trotsky by David North can be ordered here.

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