

## Stalin's Opinion of Trotsky

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We have often heard of Trotskyite opinions of Stalin: the latter was a man of limited intelligence and poor writing skills, who betrayed the socialist project and embodied the bureaucracy in himself. Far less often do we hear of Stalin's views on Trotsky. Since I have recently read through Stalin's works in some detail, let me offer an impression of his perspective on what was often a very personal conflict.

'Pretty but useless' (Stalin 1907, 52). This was Stalin's first impression of Trotsky, when they met at the London Congress of the Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1907. It was the beginning of what became a long political and, in many respects, personal struggle between the two. A few years later, while Stalin was in exile, he observed that Trotsky's version of a political bloc was an unprincipled and 'childish plan', expressing 'the helpless longing of an unprincipled person for a "good" principle' (Stalin 1912, 266, 1910, 216). Evoking circus imagery, Stalin now describes Trotsky as a 'comedian', if not a 'champion with fake muscles' (Stalin 1912, 267, 1913, 288).

By the late 1910s, the references to Trotsky begin to increase, but especially after Lenin's death. For instance, in a letter to Lenin in 1921, Stalin writes: 'A medieval craftsman who imagines he is an Ibsen hero called to "save" Russia by an ancient saga' (Stalin 1921, 50). Or perhaps he is a 'superman' who stands above the Central Committee (Stalin 1924b, 14), taking offence at everyone. However, he is more like Tit Titych, about whom it was said: 'Who would offend you, Tit Titych? You yourself will offend everyone!' (*Laughter.*)' (Stalin 1924b, 6).

All this is relatively light-hearted, but by the mid-1920s the struggle between them became more serious. Trotsky's prickly arrogance contrasted sharply with Stalin's toughness. They struggled over the legacy of Lenin, with Trotsky claiming to be the true heir, while Stalin distinguished between Leninism and Trotskyism, the latter being a deviation (Stalin 1924c, 1924a, 1925a, 113-19, 1926). In short, Trotskyism is 'a peculiar ideology that is incompatible with Leninism' (Stalin 1924c, 388), let alone the policies of the Comintern (Stalin 1927b, 314-18). Even so, Stalin was still able to make jokes at Trotsky's expense. Thus, 'It is not the Party's fault if Trotsky begins to get a high temperature after every attack he makes upon the Party' (Stalin 1925b, 6-7). And: 'he

resembles an actor rather than a hero', if not a 'comic-opera Clemenceau' (Stalin 1927b, 288-89, 1927a, 56).

By the 1930s Stalin had dispensed with the humour at Trotsky's expense. With the plots against the government, Trotsky's expulsion from the party and international engagement, Trotskyism was transformed from a political trend in the working class to a 'wild and unprincipled gang of wreckers, diversionists, spies and assassins acting on the instructions of the intelligence services of foreign states' (Stalin 1937, 249; see also 251-52). Indeed, Trotskyism had become part of a fifth column, one with international bourgeois forces if not of fascism itself. It is full of duplicity and double-dealing, engaging in nothing less than terrorism against the Soviet state. One must never forget, writes Stalin, that 'the more hopeless the position of the enemies becomes the more eagerly will they clutch at extreme methods as the only methods of the doomed in their struggle against the Soviet power' (Stalin 1937, 244).

The one who 'pretty but useless' thirty years before has now become a 'fiend', a 'venal slave', if not a 'monster' (Stalin 1937, 244, 1939, 395). The feeling was mutual.

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