

Trotsky and the death of the Revolution

By Emanuel Litvinoff

THE second volume of Mr Isaac Deutscher's life of Trotsky, *The Prophet Unarmed* (Oxford, 38s), confirms one's opinion that the finished work (the third and final volume is promised soon) will rank among the great political biographies of our time, both as a work of scholarship that is indispensable to an understanding of the Soviet Union and as the life-story of a complex and fascinating personality. In the period with which the book deals, between 1921 and 1929, Stalin won control of the levers of power, the engine of the Revolution was put into reverse, and a movement that had promised liberation from injustice became a steam-rolling bureaucracy. This was the penalty the Revolution paid for the defeat of Trotsky, incomparably the most brilliant Bolshevik in Russia, whose subtle, many-sided genius reflected the positive humanist qualities of communism and whose eclipse condemned Marxism to 25 years of sterility.

Drawing on a great deal of new material from "the Trotsky Archives," in addition to known sources, Mr Deutscher is able to relate these momentous developments in terms of the inner party struggle, which became increasingly ferocious in the brief period of collective leadership after Lenin's death in 1924. In this struggle Trotsky was his own worst enemy. He had emerged from the Civil War with a conqueror's halo, and was with Lenin, the dominant figure of the Revolution. None could rival him as a theorist. His powerful intellect ranged searchingly among the problems of politics, science, literature, and art with which the new society was confronted, and whatever he said commanded respect, if not always agreement. But he was often a victim of his own inconsistencies. Known as one of the strictest party disciplinarians, he could crusade for greater intellectual freedom and yet support the suppression of political opposition. He bitterly attacked the Great Russianism of Stalin and his allies, condemned the abuses of privilege by the party bureaucrats, and yet, at crucial moments, ranged himself on their side in a perverse demonstration of loyalty. This was partly so because, as Mr Deutscher points out, the processes against which he reacted developed piecemeal and in an ambiguous manner, and his reactions were, therefore, also piecemeal and vague. But in all this "one relatively stable issue stood out—the rivalry between Stalin and Trotsky," a rivalry that sprang "from an almost instinctive antagonism of temperaments, backgrounds, political inclinations, and personal ambitions."

It was some time before Trotsky took Stalin's rivalry seriously: there was an element of intellectual arrogance in his contempt for Stalin's mediocrity. But the delay was fatal. With great tactical skill and obsessive perseverance Stalin organised his opponent's downfall. He exploited Trotsky's own brilliant qualities to discredit him, was sounder in his judgment of political realities, and did not hesitate to use against Trotsky and his friends the discreditable weapon of anti-Semitism. On one occasion when Trotsky was given the opportunity to crush his enemy once and for all he acted with magnanimity and held back. The Soviet people paid in blood for that mistaken act of charity.

The defeat of Trotsky was also the defeat of Lenin and the defeat of the Revolution. However much Khrushchev and the present Soviet leadership may talk about the return to Leninism, it is Stalin's Russia they have inherited. Mr Deutscher is more optimistic. "What the Soviet Union and communism take over from Stalinism is mainly its practical achievement; in other respects . . . the legacy of the Stalin era is worse than empty; the sooner it is disposed of the better. But precisely in these respects Trotsky has still much to offer. . . ." One must respect Mr Deutscher's judgment and hope that he is right.