

A diary of defiance

By Emanuel Litvinoff

SOMEHOW over the years the strange impression has got abroad that Trotsky fell from power because he was incapable of the ruthlessness of his rival. He seemed to represent the creative Western-oriented aspects of the Revolution that were swamped by the tides of Stalinist barbarism. Yet it was Trotsky, the Bolshevik Field Marshal, who bloodily crushed the rebellious sailors of Kronstadt in March, 1921, and who justified the summary execution of political opponents in his pamphlet "The Defence of Terrorism." Indeed, with his revolutionary fanaticism and the intellectual arrogance that made him see himself, in Edmund Wilson's memorable phrase, as "the aristocrat of the revolution," Trotsky in the 1920s was a potentially more intimidating figure than the pipe-smoking bureaucrat who drove him from the Kremlin and arranged his assassination in Mexico.

But Trotsky's *Diary in Exile, 1935* (Faber, 21s.), covering seven months of his life in France and Norway, contains the reflections of a lonely, hunted man, who arouses pity rather than awe and admiration. The opening page establishes the mood of defeat: "I am obliged to resort to such ersatz journalism as a private diary . . . Will it be for long? Perhaps months; in any case not years. Events must come to a head in one way or another and put an end to the diary—if it is not cut short even sooner by a surreptitious shot directed by an agent of . . . Stalin, Hitler, or their French friends," and one entry after another records the persecutions, petty humiliations, poverty, and anxieties that allowed the sick revolutionary no peace.

He was pursued by tragedies. His eldest daughter, Zinaida, had committed suicide in Berlin in 1933. The G.P.U. were conducting a blood-feud against those of his family and associates who remained in Russia, his first wife, his younger son Sergey, his son-in-law, his closest friends, of whose fate little is still known in the West. (A year ago I met a man who was in the death cell with Sergey the night before he was shot.) Trotsky was fifty-five, troubled with chronic ill-health, and wryly reminded of Lenin's remark: "Do you know what is the greatest vice? To be more than 55 years old." Life seemed to consist of little but vicissitudes, to be sustained only for the sake of Natalie Ivanovna Sedova, the woman who bravely shared his exile, and for the communist future of mankind.

Yet the diary is not just the melancholy document of a failed revolutionary. Trotsky was too brilliant and original to be dull even in defeat. Like an old heavyweight champion nailed to the ringside he knew the game inside out, and he could still punch. His diary offers a brisk commentary on European and Russian politics in the mid-30s, cruelly assessing the statesmen, the politicians, the dishonest shifts in pursuit of political advantage. It is crowded with absorbing anecdotes of Lenin, Stalin, Ulyanova, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others garnered when he himself was still in the centre of the web of power. It is informed throughout by a restless, destructive intelligence shrewd at analysing the weaknesses of both friends and enemies. And all the time there is the cry of defiance. He refused to concede Stalin the victory.

But the old eagle was dying and Stalin was merciless. The long arm of his power reached out and drove Trotsky from one uneasy refuge to another, from France to Norway, from Norway to Mexico. The assassins of the G.P.U. shadowed him wherever he went and picked off his supporters one by one, his eldest son, Lyova, a young German secretary whose decapitated body was found in the Seine, a Czech secretary kidnapped in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, a host of others pursued with relentless vigilance wherever they sought to escape. Then the arm reached out to Mexico and Trotsky's life was ended by the blade of a pick-axe. Stalin had once said: "The greatest delight is to mark one's enemy, prepare everything, avenge oneself thoroughly, and then go to sleep." Stalin could sleep at last, and there is nothing in this diary to suggest that his triumph over Trotsky was not complete and enduring. The Russia of to-day is the house that Stalin built and even the name of Trotsky has no place in it.