

SECTION III. RESEARCH PROJECTS AND DISSERTATIONS – WORK IN PROGRESS

Aleksandr Reznik
Department of History
University of Basel, Switzerland

The Cult of Leon Trotsky in the Political Culture of the Russian Civil War

My research project explores the formation and perception of the political cult of Leon Trotsky during the full-scale Civil War on the territory of the former Russian Empire (1918–1921). The epoch of wars and revolutions has always been central to the academic and public discussions that have intensified due to centennial of these events, playing a key role in the ongoing “wars of memory”. Trotsky’s political cult serves as a window into the political culture of the Civil War epoch and helps us to understand the reasons for the strengthening of authoritarianism in Soviet Russia.

The nature of Trotsky’s cult must be seen as a case of “modern personality cults”, which, according to Jan Plamper, are a product of modern and mass politics, media and education in “secular” and “closed” societies.¹ Political cults of personality gradually became the “assemblage point” of dominant secular ideologies and myths, as it has been shown in the works on the cults of Lenin, Stalin and others. Working with such concepts as “charisma” and “sacredness”, Benno Ennker and Jan Plamper reconstructed specific historical circumstances that made personality cults possible after the fall of the Russian Empire.

However, cults of political “losers” or “failed” cults, such as the cult of Kerensky in 1917² and the cult of Trotsky, have been just as significant for the history of the Russian Revolution. Therefore, there are many biographies of Leon Trotsky, but none of them account for the symbolic aspect of politics, including those which focus specifically on Trotsky’s activities during the Civil War, while works that deal with the symbolic order of Soviet politics do not consider Trotsky.³

The figure of Trotsky and the phenomenon of his cult are of crucial importance for understanding the Russian political universe in the time of the Revolution and the Civil War that followed. The history of formation, usages and perceptions of the cult creates a dynamic

¹ Jan Plamper: *The Stalin Cult. A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, p. XVII.

² Boris I Kolonitskii: “Tovarishch Kerenskii”. *Antimonarkhicheskaia revoliutsiia i formirovanie kul'ta “vozhdia naroda” (mart — iun 1917 goda)*, Moskva, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017.

³ Graeme Gill: *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

and multidimensional picture of Russia's political culture in the times of its reinvention. During the period of 1917–1921 the cult of leaders (*kul't vozhdiei*) became a prominent component of political culture. The project will place Trotsky's cult in the context of big and small cults of his time, from Kerensky to Lenin and Stalin. In the situation when there was no one and only ideological project (which appeared only after the death of Lenin in the form of "Leninism"), these early cults served as the base for the later cults of Lenin and Stalin — which makes it even more important to look at the figure of the "failed" leader Trotsky.

The two following concepts are central for my research: political culture and political communication. I follow Lynn Hunt in defining political culture as "the values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions".⁴ Such a broad understanding of "the political" is common for the set of approaches and methodologies known as New Political History, its characteristic feature being its special attention to symbolic, ritualized, routinized and informal aspects of politics. Arguably, the most effective and conventional among these methods is the study of the images of power — a field pioneered by Marc Bloch, Ernst Kantorowicz and Richard Wortman. Scholars of New Political History emphasize the importance of symbols and images of power for our understanding of the Russian Revolution.

Images, along with symbols and language (discourse) of power are the focus of the cultural history of politics.⁵ Images of power were being constructed in the context of competing and conflicting narratives that reflected the ideological beliefs of their authors. Political culture was based on practices that consisted of methods and techniques that formed the mechanism of political communication. Following the approach developed by the Bielefeld University's collaborative research center "The Political as a Space of Communication in History", I understand the political essence of communication as "having a broad and sustainable impact, aiming at obligatoriness" (of power relations, rules, borders) "referring to an imagined collective entity".⁶

1) My key research question is concerned with what was special about the way the leadership cult was formed in the context of the Revolution and the Civil War. In order to see the depth of the cult as well as its limits I will explore the practices of political communication between the "producers" and the "receivers" of the cult. To understand the nature of these public relations it is important to find out how the image of Trotsky was used (explained, translated, etc.) and which of its components were most accepted by supporters of the Bolsheviks and those who fought against them.

2) I intend to reconstruct the institutes, actors, meanings and limits of the cult in narratives, political practices, iconography and onomastics that served as the base of political communication. The task is to show that political communication during the Civil War was a complex mixture of diverse individual and collective aspirations which made it impossible to have a single image of a leader even when his symbolical status was as high as in the case of Trotsky.

⁴ Lynn Hunt: *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 20th ed. (1st ed. 1984), Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 10.

⁵ Victoria E. Bonnell: *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; Orlando Figes, Boris I. Kolonitskii: *Interpreting the Russian Revolution. The Language and Symbols of 1917*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999.

⁶ Willibald Steinmerz, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.): *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2013.

3) The objective of my research is to reconstruct the topography of Trotsky's cult, the informational and political spaces of its dissemination, its "center(s)" and "peripheries" and the "borders" between them. I will explore the cult production technologies by looking at the political and cultural institutions which were involved in its creation and by analyzing artistic devices, narrative styles, onomastics, iconography that included a mixture of pre-revolutionary practices and revolutionary innovations.

The main sources of my research are documents of the state and the party institutions and its apparatuses, the Soviet/Bolsheviks' propaganda in printed, visual and oral forms, letters to Trotsky "from below", as well as the Anti-Bolshevik propaganda.

My preliminary conclusions are the following:

The starting point of Trotsky's cult was the time of the battle for Kazan' in September 1918. Not only this first important victory of the Red Army, but also the critical situation caused by Lenin's assassination attempt structured the main lines of the cult narratives about Trotsky.

Georgii Ustinov, the Soviet journalist and editor of Trotsky's military train newspaper *V Puti* contributed to the creation of the political myth about Trotsky. At the same time, there were no conscious attempts to create a cult of Trotsky neither by Trotsky's apparatus, nor by the central Soviet institutions. Therefore, the cult was fragmented and thus limited. Images of leaders in newspapers and magazines were varied depending on the region, what questions the assumption of ideological homogeneity of the revolutionary period in general and of Bolshevik or/and Soviet propaganda in particular.

Trotsky's image served as a symbol mostly of the Military and the Revolution in general, and, to a lesser degree, of the Bolsheviks party and Lenin's government. It pictured him as *vozhd* ("leader"), second only to Lenin, although sometimes Trotsky was even seen as the only true leader. However, even the high symbolical status that Trotsky possessed did not guarantee the "success" of his cult and his victory in the political struggle that followed.

Contact: reznik07@gmail.com