# Leon Trotsky

## *A Revolutionary's Life*

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*Frontispiece: Leon Trotsky in Mexico, c. 1940. Photograph by Alexander H. Buchman.*

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# 1

## *The Young Revolutionary*

To THE WORLD he will always be known as Leon Trotsky, but he was born Lev Davidovich Bronstein on October 26, 1879, in southern Ukraine, near the city of Kherson. His parents, David and Anna Bronstein, had eight children. Lev was their fifth, the third-oldest of their surviving children; four others died in infancy of diphtheria and scarlet fever. The Bronsteins were not typical Russian Jews. Unlike the majority of the tsar's five million Jews who were compelled to reside in the Pale of Settlement, an area encompassing much of present-day Belarus and Ukraine, Lev's parents lived on a farm, near land that David's father had initially cultivated in the 1850s when he left Poltava to settle among a group of Jewish colonies established by Tsar Alexander I earlier in the century. Most Russian Jews lived in small towns, on the margins of Russian cultural and social life, their day-to-day existence constrained by myriad legal restrictions that reduced them to second-class citizens.

In 1879 Tsar Alexander II sat securely on the throne, but the year marked a dramatic turn in the fate of Russia's Jews and the struggle against the Romanov dynasty. Earlier in his reign, Alexander II had carried out many significant reforms following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, including the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the introduction of laws in the 1850s and 1860s that eased some of the long-standing civil restrictions on Russia's Jews. He ended forced Jewish juvenile conscription; expanded the right of Jews to live closer to the borders of Poland and Bessarabia; broadened opportunities for prosperous Jewish merchants to live in major Russian cities; and, at least under law, permitted Jews with university degrees to pursue government service throughout the Russian Empire.

These changes were not enough to assuage radical opinion, and the Jews remained a vulnerable and persecuted minority. On August 26, 1879, the People's Will, an underground opposition dedicated to the violent overthrow of the monarchy, proclaimed its intention to kill the tsar. And in November, an attempt was made to blow up the royal train. A month later, on December 21, Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili, who would adopt the name Stalin as a young revolutionary, came into the world in a remote corner of the Caucasus.

Lev was born into a Russia that continued to be roiled by the "Jewish Question." Seven months before his birth, Russia's Jews were shaken by an unexpected attack. On March 5, 1879, a group of Jews was brought to trial in the town of Kutaisi for the ritual murder of a young peasant girl in Georgia. She had disappeared on Passover Eve in April 1878 and had been found dead two days later. The coroner ruled that she had accidentally drowned, but the police, convinced that the date of her disappearance and unusual wounds on her body and hands were evidence of foul play, arrested nine Jews from a neighboring village. Their trial was the first ritual-murder trial ever held in the Russian Empire, and though the defendants were acquit-

ted, the case provoked intense attention, including a concerted campaign in Russia's extreme right-wing press to lend credibility to the charge.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, who was famous for his sympathy for the downtrodden, nonetheless succumbed to the hysteria surrounding the Kutaisi affair; he was so obsessed with Jews and the "Jewish Question" that he introduced the idea of ritual murder into his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which he completed in November 1880, a few months before his death. Dostoevsky had also engaged in attacks on Jews in Russia and in Europe generally. Dostoevsky held the Jews responsible for the abuses of capitalism and the menace of socialism, concluding that Russia should not harbor any forgiving sentimentality toward its Jewish minority.

David Bronstein did not allow either antisemitic episodes or the general suspicion about Jews to get in his way. He showed remarkable initiative, buying a farm named Yanovka after the previous owner, then expanding his holdings either by purchase or by indirectly leasing land when renewed restrictions on Jews' owning of land took hold in 1881. Yanovka was remote, fourteen miles from the nearest post office and twenty-two from the railroad station. At one point, Bronstein controlled almost three thousand acres. He owned herds of cattle and sheep, a windmill, and a threshing machine, and he attracted the business of peasants who relied on him to separate and grind their grain. He also owned a brick kiln; the bricks he produced carried an imprint of the family name, and even today buildings in the surrounding area can be found with the word "Bronstein" visible on the walls. Trotsky once ruefully recalled how hard his father worked to enrich himself. "By indefatigable, cruel toil that spared neither himself nor others, and by hoarding every penny, my father rose in the world." But the parents' focus on work took an emotional toll on their children. "The land, the cattle, the poultry, the mill,

took all my parents' time; there was none left for us. The seasons succeeded one another, and waves of farm work swept over domestic affection. There was no display of tenderness in our family."

David was illiterate and, according to Trotsky's memoirs, his parents spoke a "broken mixture" of Russian and Ukrainian, leaving Lev at an initial disadvantage at school. And, according to Trotsky, they did not speak Yiddish at a time when 97 percent of Russia's Jews regarded Yiddish as their mother tongue.

This area of Ukraine was still far more Jewish than a casual observer might assume and more Jewish than Trotsky preferred to recall. In his memoirs, he estimated that there were forty Jewish colonies with approximately twenty-five thousand Jewish residents in all. According to Trotsky, his father liked to proclaim his atheism, even to scoff at religion. His mother, although not observant of traditional rituals, preferred to avoid sewing or other small tasks on the Sabbath, or riding into town where other Jews would see her. Trotsky does not say so, but there must have been a sufficiently dense Jewish presence on neighboring farms and in town for her to feel such inhibitions. When the children were young, David and Anna Bronstein marked holidays in a nearby synagogue. But as the family grew more prosperous and the children grew older, there was less and less observance.

When Lev was seven, his parents sent him to the nearby village of Gromokley where he lived with relatives—Uncle Abram and Aunt Rachel—in order to attend his first school, a Jewish *heder*. He studied arithmetic, learned to read Russian, and was expected to study the Bible in the original Hebrew, then translate passages into Yiddish. "I had no intimate friends among my classmates," he recalled, "as I did not speak Yiddish."

Seeing a bit of the broader world brought him into contact with a harsher reality than he had seen at home. Gromokley

was located among a group of Jewish and German settlements. One day, Lev witnessed a young woman with a reputation for loose morals being driven out of a Jewish village by a mob berating her with curses. "This biblical scene was engraved on my memory forever," he later wrote. (His Uncle Abram married this same woman several years later.) Lev noticed that the Jewish homes were little more than dilapidated cabins with tattered roofs and scrawny cows in the gardens, while the nearby German settlements were clean and well appointed. The experiment with this school was a failure and Lev returned home within three months. Evidently, his parents' ambivalent Jewish attitudes undermined whatever religious allegiance Lev might have picked up at heder.

Nonetheless, Lev was bright and eager to learn. Back at home, he took to reading whatever books lay about, copying passages into a notebook. He also helped his father with the account ledgers, displaying a talent for numbers that might have taken his life in a different direction from the one fate had in store for him. Spending his time around the farm, he came to know farmhands and peasants. One worker in particular, the mechanic Ivan Grebien, fascinated him. Grebien showed him tools and how the machinery worked. Grebien also had the respect of Lev's parents, who invited their mechanic to take lunch and dinner with the family. In his memoirs, Trotsky made a point of recalling Ivan Grebien as the principal figure of his early childhood. This may have been a sincere claim, but we cannot help but wonder whether it suited Trotsky to place a workingman at the center of his upbringing in a household that was otherwise marked by middle-class, bourgeois values and a father who Trotsky believed was capable of exploiting workers and peasants alike.

The direction of Lev's life changed in 1887 when an older cousin (his mother's nephew), Moisey Shpentzer, came to visit for the summer. Shpentzer was from Odessa. Although he had

been barred from the university over a minor political offense, he made a modest living as a journalist and statistician. His wife, Fanny, had a career as headmistress of a secular school for Jewish girls. Lev and Shpentzer took to each other. Shpentzer must have been impressed by this precocious boy, who would not turn nine until October, because he offered to bring Lev to Odessa to continue his education there under his and his wife's protection. In the spring of 1888 Lev traveled two hundred miles by train and steamboat to Odessa.

The Shpentzers turned the unpolished boy into a refined and well-educated young man. Monya, as Lev called him, taught him "how to hold a glass, how to wash, how to pronounce . . . words." Lev began to pay attention to his clothes, adopting a lifelong habit of dressing well. By then, he was assuming the striking physical appearance the world came to recognize: thick, wavy black hair over a high forehead, with pince-nez over blue eyes. The Shpentzers worried that young Lev studied too hard; "I devoured books ravenously and had to be forced to go out for walks," Trotsky recalled of that time. He also enjoyed rocking their new baby girl. As she grew up, it was Lev who "detected her first smile, . . . taught her to walk, and . . . taught her to read." (This girl, under the name Vera Inber, became a well-known Moscow poet.)* The New York radical journalist Max Eastman, who befriended Trotsky in the 1920s, met the Shpentzers and found them to be "kindly, quiet, poised, and intelligent."

Initially, the accommodations were modest; Lev slept behind a curtain in the dining room for four years. But the Shpentzers offered him a home imbued with a passion for literature in a cosmopolitan city that nurtured his curiosity and

*In the 1920s, like many other writers and poets, Inber wrote verses in praise of Trotsky. But after his expulsion from the country, she was compelled to denounce him and other opposition figures, even to call for their execution.

imagination. They tutored him in Russian, introduced him to classical European and Russian literature—he enjoyed reading Dickens in particular—and were not afraid to have forbidden books on the shelves, like Leo Tolstoy's play *The Power of Darkness*, which had just been banned by the tsar's censors; Lev heard them discussing the play and then read it on his own.

When it came to politics in the Shpentzers' home, however, "there was dissatisfaction [with the autocracy], but the regime was held to be unshakable. The boldest dreamed of a constitution as possible only after several decades." Shpentzer himself, in Trotsky's memory, held moderately liberal views, "lightly touched by vague socialist sympathies, tinged with Populist and Tolstoyan ideas." The adults remained cautious in front of Lev, avoiding talk of politics "because they were afraid that I might say something censurable at school, and get myself in trouble." For similar reasons, they would not permit him to read newspapers, hoping to shield him from radical ideas.

It was in Odessa that official antisemitism got in Lev's way. In 1887, as part of a broader set of restrictions directed against Jews in the wake of Alexander II's assassination, a new government decree had imposed harsh quotas on Jewish students in secondary school. Depending on the circumstances, Jews could be limited to 10 percent of all pupils. This restriction directly affected Lev. As a Jew, he had to take a competitive examination to enter Saint Paul's *Realschule*, the school picked out for him by the Shpentzers. But hampered by his age—he was a year younger than the other pupils in his grade level—and his lack of formal education, Lev failed the examination and had to spend a year in a special class to prepare for entry.

This incident may well have been the first time that Lev encountered prejudice because of his Jewish origins. But just as in his parents' home, he did not develop an emotional, let alone a spiritual or religious, attachment to being a Jew—Eastman observed that "it was not a thing that entered into his heart as

a child"—so this episode of official anti-Jewish discrimination did not reinforce a residual loyalty based on being among the empire's most persecuted. Trotsky was sincere when he wrote in *My Life:* "This national inequality probably was one of the underlying causes of my dissatisfaction with the existing order, but it was lost among all the other phases of social injustice. It never played a leading part—not even a recognized one—in the lists of my grievances."* Other Jewish socialists in his generation remembered their childhoods differently. Both Yuli Martov and Pavel Axelrod, who became close associates of Trotsky's when he first reached London, made a point of recalling the anti-Jewish hatred and discrimination that they faced; Martov, in particular, never forgot the terrible fear he experienced as a child during the Odessa pogrom of May 1881. For Lev, untoward references to his background were "merely another kind of rudeness." Eastman insisted, based on his friendship with Trotsky, that any such incidents "left no traces . . . in his consciousness of himself." Early on, Trotsky came to regard his upbringing within a Jewish family as a simple accident of birth. Estranged from his parents, he distanced himself from their shared Jewish origins. There was no positive content to his Jewish identity.

Although Saint Paul's Realschule had been founded by German Lutherans, it was nonsectarian and accepted a diverse student body. "There was no open baiting of nationalities," Trotsky recalled, and the children were given religious instruction according to the faith of their families. "A good-natured man named Ziegelman instructed the Jewish boys in the Bible and the history of the Jewish people," Trotsky wrote. But "these lessons, conducted in Russian, were never taken seriously by the boys." Lev's father still wanted him to study the

*Trotsky preferred a vague euphemism—"national inequality"—in place of explicitly naming the regime's antisemitic prejudice.

Hebrew Bible, "this being one of the marks of his parental vanity." Lev was tutored by a learned, older Jewish man, but the lessons, as Trotsky recalled, over the course of several months "did little to confirm [him] in the ancestral faith." In spite of David Bronstein's avowed atheism, this instruction was probably meant to prepare Lev for his Bar Mitzvah at the age of thirteen, a point Trotsky failed to specify in his memoirs; the ceremony never took place.

Odessa, with its prominent harbor on the Black Sea, was a distinctly cosmopolitan city. Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Germans, Italians, and French lived there, along with more exotic communities of Turks, Tatars, Persians, and Syrians. By the 1830s the city had become famous enough that the character of Père Goriot in Honoré de Balzac's novel declares on his deathbed his dream of going to Odessa. For Dostoevsky, Odessa verged on being too cosmopolitan. It was not only "the center of our rampant socialism," as he claimed in a letter in 1878, but "the city of the Yids," as well. As a center for the export of Russian grain, Odessa thrived on commercial relations with Europe, Asia, and the United States.

For Jews, life in Odessa offered entry points into Russian society and culture; the city was probably the most modern place where they could live within the confines of the Pale of Settlement. Here again, as in his years in Yanovka, Lev was living among many Jews. Jewish residents numbered well over 100,000 and made up more than a third of the city's population. Shpentzer's wife directed a secular high school for Jewish girls, while major Yiddish and Hebrew literary figures, like Hayim Nachman Bialik, Saul Tchernikhovsky, Ahad Ha'am, and Simon Dubnow, lived in the city in the final decades of the nineteenth century. None of this touched Lev.

He thrived instead within the broader secular culture of Odessa. Lev discovered opera and the theater and began to write poems and stories. Moisey Shpentzer opened a liberal

publishing business, and soon writers and journalists were stopping by the house, thrilling Lev by their presence and their passion for literature. In his eyes, "authors, journalists, and artists always stood for a world which was more attractive than any other, one open only to the elect."

Admitted to Saint Paul's, Lev was quickly recognized as the best student in his class. Moisey Shpentzer eagerly recalled, "No one had to take charge of his training, no one had to worry about his lessons. He always did more than was expected of him." But school had its difficult moments. Lev could be outspoken and in a candid moment once recalled about himself that he was "ambitious, quick-tempered, and probably a hard person to get along with," traits that never left him. He edited a school magazine, but knew enough to stop when a friendly teacher pointed out that such ventures had been expressly forbidden by the Ministry of Education. Another time, in the second grade, Lev joined classmates in booing and hissing an unpopular French teacher. Lev was singled out by cowardly classmates, and the targeted teacher, happy to confirm the identity of the chief miscreant, had Lev expelled for the remainder of the year.

Trotsky drew a telling lesson from this incident. He understood that the school was divided among certain groups of moral categories: "The tale-bearers and the envious at one pole, the frank, courageous boys at the other, and the neutral, vacillating mass in the middle. These three groups," Trotsky wrote in 1929, "never quite disappeared even during the years that followed." The Shpentzers were emotionally supportive, but Lev was anxious about his father's reaction and was relieved—and more than a little surprised—when David Bronstein proved to be understanding and even took pleasure in hearing Lev's impudent whistling, the obnoxious behavior that had so upset the teacher.

Lev was readmitted the following year and quickly regained preeminence among his classmates. But his rebellious

nature had not been totally checked. In the fifth grade, a lazy and incompetent teacher of literature named Anton Gamow kept failing to correct the boys' homework. Enraged, Lev and others refused to write new compositions and challenged the teacher to accept his responsibilities. The boys faced punishment for their insolence, but otherwise remained in good standing. Gamow has not been lost to history. His son, George Gamow, was born in Odessa in 1904, studied physics in Saint Petersburg, and defected to Western Europe in the 1930s. He reached the United States and became a widely admired theoretical physicist, famous for his work on cosmology and quantum physics and for his books on science for the general reader.

For Lev, growing into adolescence in the sophisticated and intellectually engaged life of Odessa provoked conflicts with his father. When he went back to the farm during vacations, Lev felt estranged, as if "something new had grown up like a wall between myself and the things bound up with my childhood." David Bronstein could be a harsh man. Trotsky told Max Eastman that his father "had been respected with a good deal of fear by his neighbors." As Lev watched the peasants and his father bickering in the mill over grain and money, he understood that his father did not hesitate to look out for himself.

At times, Lev sensed some kind of injustice unfolding and worried that his father was taking advantage of the less well-off. Lev was attentive to all manner of slights: if his father was too stingy about tipping a porter who carried their luggage, if laborers on the farm received their due but "the terms of employment were always interpreted harshly." One day a cow ran into his father's wheat field. David Bronstein took custody of the animal and vowed to hold it until the owner covered the damages. The peasant objected, begging, his hat in his hand, tears in his eyes, "bent over as though he were a little old woman who needed help." Lev broke down in sorrow, disturbed by the peasant's humiliation and his father's implacable

attitude. He was consoled only when his parents assured him that the cow had been returned and its owner absolved of any damages. Trotsky was beginning to grasp the social and economic tensions that played out between his prosperous father and the workers and peasants who depended on him for their livelihood. Lev found himself sympathizing with them and began to feel unease with his father's way of life. Something else mattered more to him. "The instinct of acquisition, the petty-bourgeois outlook and habits of life—from these I sailed away with a mighty push, and did so never to return." That Trotsky liked to recall such incidents may tell us more about his adult sensibility than his actual childhood experience. As Trotsky's most famous biographer, Isaac Deutscher, observed, many people have seen "worse scenes in their childhood without later becoming revolutionaries."

In 1894 Lev was in the sixth grade in Odessa when Tsar Alexander III died on November 1. For the students, "the event seemed tremendous, even incredible, but very distant," Trotsky remembered, "like an earthquake in another country." Alexander III had lived to be only forty-nine, and his son, Nicholas II, had not been adequately prepared to assume the throne. Trotsky was fifteen years old, hundreds of miles from the center of Russian political life. He was barely beginning to feel outrage in the face of autocratic oppression that would, in a few years, merge his fate with that of the tsar whose accession had unexpectedly taken place.

By 1895 Lev had spent seven years at Saint Paul's Realschule, including the initial year to prepare for admission. Saint Paul's offered only six grades, so Lev needed to choose another high school for a final year of secondary education. To be nearer his parents, Lev left Odessa for Nikolaev, a smaller, more provincial city along the coast of the Black Sea.

Looking back on his teenage years, Trotsky believed that he departed Odessa politically unaware—"vaguely opposition-

ist," was how he put it. He did not know the name of Friedrich Engels, who died in 1895, and "could hardly say anything definite about Marx." All this changed in 1896, during Lev's final year of school, when he began to question his "place in human society." Living with a family whose children were older than he, Lev was exposed to the passionate arguments of people bent on converting him to their new faith in socialism. He responded with "ironic superiority" to their cajoling. Even the landlady gratefully noted his resistance and held him up to her enthusiastic children as a model of mature judgment.

But then suddenly, as if his earlier resistance had been at least partly founded on an underlying attraction for radical ideas, Lev announced his conversion and proceeded to swing "leftward with such speed that it even frightened some . . . new friends." His life changed abruptly. He neglected his school work, skipped classes, and began to collect "illegal political pamphlets." He "swallowed books" and "began to read newspapers . . . with a political mind." These were the first steps in his political awakening.

Lev also came to know former exiles who were attracting police surveillance, and found himself drawn to his landlady's gardener, a Czech named Franz Shvigovsky, whose interest in politics brought young people and political activists to his modest cabin. Shvigovsky introduced Lev to serious political literature, to the thrill of political debate, and to the often arcane but gripping arguments over the competing claims of the Populist movement and the newly emerging Marxist party of Social Democrats. A member of that circle, Grigory Ziv, in a memoir that is one of the few independent sources of information about Trotsky's life when he was choosing the path of revolution, later recalled that the meetings had a "harmless character." Shvigovsky made everyone feel at home; in the relaxed, informal atmosphere in his garden, they spoke their minds, confident they would be free of police surveillance. So they

gathered "like moths to a fire." But their meetings had "a most odious reputation [in Nikolaev] . . . as a center of all sorts of the most terrible conspiracies," according to Ziv. The police dispatched spies who could only report that Shvigovsky was a generous host who liked to serve apples and tea to his guests and engage them in eccentric discussions.

Lev could not conceal the changes in his life from his parents. David Bronstein sometimes visited Nikolaev on business. Once he learned of Lev's new friends and his lack of interest in school, David Bronstein asserted his parental authority, but to no avail. There were "several stormy scenes," with Lev defending the right to follow his own path. He refused his father's material support, not wanting to accept money and the inevitable call for obedience, quit the house where he had been living, and joined Shvigovsky in a larger cottage where the older man had moved. Lev became one of six sharing a communal arrangement.

Lev's political commitment moved fitfully from adolescent curiosity to political action. Initially, he found himself adrift among contending political theories. He studied British thinkers, like the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the liberal John Stuart Mill, whose works were banned from university libraries and courses. He read Nikolai Chernyshevsky's famous book *What Is to Be Done?*, written in a Saint Petersburg prison in 1862. Chernyshevsky was a compelling figure in Russian history. Initially a leader among young, radical idealists, he moved from outspoken criticism of Russian culture to advocating outright revolution. The tsarist regime packed him off to prison, then years of exile in Siberia and cities remote from Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Chernyshevsky died in 1889, not many years before Lev's passion for politics began to take hold; probably, like many of Russia's young radicals, Lev regarded Chernyshevsky as a saint.

But as Lev came to realize, Western thinkers like Mill and Bentham, and even a native Russian writer like Chernyshevsky,

for all the romantic ideals attached to his name, were increasingly remote from the controversies arising in the 1890s in the wake of Alexander III's death and the accession of Nicholas II. University students, in particular, were beginning to challenge the autocracy. Asked to take an oath of loyalty to the new tsar, most students in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev refused.

Nicholas II was also facing more subversive challenges. Radical young Russians now confronted two competing visions of revolution: the Populists saw the overwhelming majority of the population—the peasants—as the most likely avenue to resistance. They adopted a romantic view of the peasants, particularly after Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom in 1861. But when the peasants failed to respond to the Populists' dream of overthrowing the monarchy, the Populists turned to acts of terrorism in a vain attempt to eliminate the autocracy.

Marxist thinkers like Georgy Plekhanov urged antitsarist revolutionaries to shift their hopes away from the peasants, to repudiate acts of individual terrorism, and to focus on organizing workers to demand socialism and democracy. It was in the wake of Plekhanov's call to action that Vladimir Ulyanov—Lenin—and other Marxist radicals established the Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, a development that very quickly led to Lenin's arrest in December 1895.

Lev and his circle of friends could not help being influenced by these events, even if they were living far from Russia's urban centers, where revolutionaries like Lenin were hoping to organize. Most of those in Shvigovsky's circle thought of themselves as Populists. Their sympathies were attached to Russia's romantic revolutionaries who believed that only violent attacks on the tsar and his ministers could destroy the autocracy. They had succeeded in killing Alexander II in 1881. Six years later, another group of revolutionaries, including Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's older brother, plotted to kill Alexander III. But the conspiracy unraveled. Alexander Ulyanov was arrested, then hanged on May 8, 1887.

Lev joined the discussions at Shvigovsky's at an auspicious moment. The group was unevenly divided, with almost everyone arguing in favor of the Populist position, leaving a young woman named Alexandra Sokolovskaya on her own to defend the theories of Karl Marx. Lev impulsively declared himself a Populist and soon led the charge against Sokolovskaya. Ziv recalled Lev's dramatic impact on everyone. "Because of his eminent gifts and talents," Lev was "already attracting the attention of all Franz's visitors." He was "an audacious and determined advocate," relishing a good argument and happy to engage in "merciless sarcasm" about Marxist ideas and any defense Sokolovskaya dared to muster.

Lev was not above abusing her. According to Ziv, Lev came to a New Year's Eve party for 1897 with the startling news that Sokolovskaya's arguments had prevailed; he was now a committed Marxist. His conversion thrilled her. Lev, though, had another surprise. Raising his glass, he turned to Sokolovskaya and stunned the group with a contemptuous tirade: "A curse upon all Marxists," he proclaimed, "and upon those who want to bring dryness and hardness into all the relations of life." Furious and humiliated, Sokolovskaya quit the group, convinced she would never speak with Lev again. She then left Nikolaev altogether. His rude, outspoken style left a vivid impression. "He'll either be a great hero or a great scoundrel," one friend observed. "It could be either one, but for sure he will rise to greatness."

In spite of his sarcastic remarks to Sokolovskaya, Lev, in fact, was moving in the direction of social democracy. Frustration with the tsarist autocracy was spreading among young people and Marxist ideas increasingly inspired their activities. For Lev, it seems likely that he succumbed to the spell of Marxism because it combined a blueprint for action with fierce intellectual debate, the kind of muscular, ideological give-and-take that would characterize his life for decades.

In 1897 Lev finished high school with honors and moved briefly to Odessa, where he lived with an uncle and considered enrolling in the university to study mathematics. But he could not resist the lure of political engagement. In Odessa he "made casual acquaintances among workers, obtained illegal literature, tutored some private pupils, gave surreptitious lectures to the older boys of the Trade School," before taking a steamer back to Nikolaev and to Shvigovsky's garden.

In his memoirs Trotsky recalled a terrible incident from early 1897 that galvanized young people throughout Russia. A young woman student, a political prisoner, burned herself to death in Saint Petersburg's notorious Peter and Paul Fortress. Students protested in the streets, resulting in many arrests and deportations to Siberia. Lev was now determined to move beyond heartfelt arguments over political doctrine. Enraged and enthusiastic, he was ready to take his first concrete steps in defiance of the tsarist regime: to organize workers in Nikolaev. At the time, there were about ten thousand workers and skilled artisans in the city. He adopted his first pseudonym, Lvov, and began to approach workers, inviting them to join small, discreet groups where they could discuss underground political literature that Lev and others secured or produced on their own. He succeeded in bringing together about two hundred workers to what he called the South Russian Workers' Union, drawing on locksmiths, joiners, electricians, seamstresses, and students. Years later, Trotsky recalled his initial success with characteristic enthusiasm. "The workers streamed toward us as if they had been waiting for this," he wrote in his memoirs. "We never sought them out; they looked for us." Alexandra Sokolovskaya was also involved, evidently willing to suspend her bad feelings and work alongside her younger, obnoxious associate.

Lev threw himself into the work. The union needed a newspaper, some kind of broadside, to reinforce its identity

and help rally workers to its side. Lev took on the project, calling his newspaper *Nashe Delo* (Our cause). Lacking a typewriter, he carefully "wrote proclamations and articles, and printed them all out in longhand." The effort could require up to two hours for each page. "Sometimes I didn't even unbend my back for a week, cutting my work short only for meetings and study in the groups," he later recalled. Relying on a primitive mimeograph machine donated by a wealthy supporter, he was able to produce two hundred to three hundred copies of each issue.

Lev was establishing a distinct pattern in his life. His revolutionary activity and his professional life as a journalist and editor rested on his steadfast belief in the power of the word. As he grew older and faced wrenching transitions in his life, he would invariably fall back on one fundamental idea: to establish or at least work for a newspaper, clandestine or otherwise, and then pin his hopes on the attention and influence he hoped to generate. In Nikolaev he had the satisfaction of seeing a discernible effect among the city's workers. By revolutionary standards, Lev and his comrades were trying to nurture modest goals among the workers—to insist on higher wages and shorter hours. His pamphlets also covered conditions in the city's shipyards and factories, and abuses by employers and officials.

Grigory Ziv was part of this initiative. Years later, he remembered how Lev was the moving force behind the union. "Our group was the first social democratic organization at Nikolaev," he wrote. "We were so excited by our success that we were in a state . . . of chronic enthusiasm. For the major part of these successes we were undoubtedly indebted to Bronstein, whose energy was inexhaustible and whose many-sided inventiveness and untiring drive knew no bounds." Lev was only eighteen years old. He had still not fully defined himself as a Marxist, but he was already displaying the passionate commitment that marked his life as an adult. He was accepting the need

both to study the dynamics of revolution and to pursue revolutionary goals among the workers themselves. For Trotsky, as he explained to young Spanish militants in 1932, "The study of Marxism outside of revolutionary struggle can form library rats, but not revolutionaries. Participation in the revolutionary struggle without the study of Marxism will inevitably be filled with hazards, be less confident, and turn out to be half-blind."

Lev's success as an organizer drew the attention of more than workers. The police also began to take notice, although they took a while to realize that a small group of young activists led by a teenager was responsible for so much unwanted commotion. The arrests began in January 1898. Most members of the group were detained in Nikolaev, but Lev, fearing arrest, sought refuge in the countryside where Shvigovsky was staying. The police took them both away on January 28. They transferred Lev to a prison in Nikolaev—his first of twenty prisons, as he liked to say—then to another jail in Kherson, where he remained for several months.

Tsarist prisons were miserable places. A harsh regimen compounded the physical conditions. Officials had come to understand that Lev was the ringleader and, determined to break his will, subjected him to unusual pressure. He was kept in isolation in a small, cold, vermin-riddled cell. He was given a straw mattress to sleep on, but it was removed at dawn so that he could not comfortably sit down during the day. He was not allowed into the prison yard for exercise, nor could he receive a book, a newspaper, soap, or clean underwear. He was neither interrogated nor told the charges against him. Other imprisoned members of the union fared even worse. Subjected to torture, they committed suicide, went insane, or agreed to inform on their comrades in exchange for better treatment. But Lev persevered, in spite of the severe loneliness. "The solitude was unbroken, worse than any I ever experienced afterward," he recalled about that time. To relieve the pressure, he walked con-

tinually in the cell, "taking one thousand, one hundred and eleven steps on the diagonal." At some point prison officials backed down, allowing his mother, who no doubt had to bribe her way in, to bring him soap, linen, and fruit.

By the summer of 1898 Lev was taken to a prison in Odessa, where, once again, he faced solitary confinement, but at least had the satisfaction of undergoing interrogation for the first time. Through the prison grapevine, he learned about the founding congress of the Social Democratic Party in Minsk; in spite of its august title, the "congress" comprised a meeting of nine delegates, who were almost all arrested within weeks—hardly an auspicious beginning for a faction of that same political party that seized power nineteen years later in the name of Communism.

With time on his hands and facing a less severe prison regimen, Lev took to reading. The prison library offered only religious literature. To broaden his knowledge of foreign languages, Lev read the Bible in English, French, German, and Italian. Able to receive books from the outside, he read the works of Charles Darwin, which reinforced his commitment to atheism. He also wrote literary essays, including a history of Freemasonry and another on the role of the individual in history.

It took nearly two full years before Lev learned of his ultimate punishment: he and three others from the union were to be deported to Siberia for four years. It was an administrative punishment; there was no trial. From Odessa, they were brought to Moscow and made to wait another six months in a transit prison. It was here that Lev first heard about Vladimir Lenin and began to read serious works of Marxist thought. He also began a lifelong fascination with Ferdinand LaSalle. The founder of the German Social Democratic Party, LaSalle, like Lev, had been born to a middle-class Jewish family. Like the man Lev would become, LaSalle was famous for his abilities as

an orator and an organizer. Each relied on a charismatic personality to arouse the loyalty of crowds. And both abandoned their Jewish origins, replacing the faith of their fathers with a heartfelt and all-encompassing belief in revolutionary socialism.

Lev also renewed contact with Alexandra Sokolovskaya. Facing Siberian exile, they decided to get married. Lev's father strenuously objected, convinced that this older woman was responsible for leading Lev astray. But Lev prevailed. The wedding took place in the spring of 1900, with a rabbi presiding in Lev's cell. It would be natural to wonder whether the impulse behind this marriage was genuine. Political prisoners often married each other because it conferred the right to face deportation together and thereby avoid complete isolation. Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaya, for example, had been deported to separate cities in 1897 but then arranged permission to be married, affording her the right to join him in a small town in central Siberia. As for Lev and Sokolovskaya, the initial tension between them may well have reflected more than an ideological disagreement. Lev had "raged and thundered" to overcome his father's opposition. Once married, they were sent off in a large group of convicts. Their journey to Siberia lasted about three months, with stops in transit prisons before reaching the Lena River, where they were put on a barge with a group of soldiers and, after three more weeks of slowly drifting down the river, reached the village of Ust-Kot.

It was a desolate place, a hundred peasant huts surrounded by mud in the spring and fall, with annoying midges besetting everyone in the summer and temperatures far below freezing in the winter. Lev studied Marx, "brushing cockroaches off the pages." Soon after reaching Ust-Kot, he also began to write for *Vostochnoe Obozrenie* (The eastern review), a newspaper in Irkutsk. His articles began to appear on a regular basis. Lev proved to be far more than a village correspondent. He wrote about public questions and increasingly devoted himself to lit-

erary criticism, a form that made it easier to slip ideas past the censors. He wrote about Russia's classic authors and, being a voracious reader, completed articles about Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Nietzsche, de Maupassant, Andreyev, and Gorky. Living in exile and intent on continuing his involvement in revolution, Lev adopted another pen name—Antid Oto—based on a word he found in the Italian dictionary.

The Lena River acted as a tool of communication, with political exiles of all stripes navigating their way north and south to seek companionship and share news about politics and revolution. Lev met Felix Dzherzhinsky, later the first leader of the dreaded Cheka (the Bolshevik secret police), and Mikhail Uritsky, who became chairman of the Petrograd Cheka. The exiles debated among themselves, feeling the momentum of revolution move away from Populism toward Marxism. They knew about acts of terrorism: both the minister of education and the minister of the interior were shot in those years by members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Lev opposed such acts of terrorism. "Our task is not the assassination of the tsar's ministers, but the revolutionary overthrow of tsarism," he insisted.

Observing how the concerted powers of the regime could oppress society at large and underground activists like himself, Lev argued in an essay that it was time to create a centralized party that could coordinate revolutionary activity. Lev was not alone in advocating this idea. In the summer of 1902 he received his first copy of *Iskra* (Spark), a Marxist newspaper published by Russian Social Democrats in Zurich; Vladimir Lenin was among them. Lenin had been released from exile in 1900 and soon received permission to leave Russia for Europe, where the regime assumed that he would cause less trouble. Lev also received a copy of Lenin's book *What Is to Be Done?* (named for Chernyshevsky's earlier work). Lenin, in both this book and in *Iskra*, was trying to rally followers to the cause of

Marxism under the banner of a disciplined, professional party of revolutionaries. (*Iskra* was more than a newspaper; it was the central organizing mechanism to help lead the broader Social Democratic movement.) Mesmerized, Lev grew determined to join Lenin in Europe.

From the perspective of history, it is natural to think that the tragedy of Bolshevism begins here, that creating this kind of party was the germ that led to horrors under Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin. But given the prevailing conditions under the tsar, it might well have been the only way a socialist movement could challenge the autocracy. It was one thing, however, to challenge power in a clandestine manner under a ruthless monarch. It became quite another to govern with the same single-minded purpose.

By the time Lev made plans to reach Europe, he and Alexandra Sokolovskaya had two daughters, Zinaida and Nina, the latter only four months old. Despite how hard it would be to raise the girls alone under the stark conditions of Siberian exile, Sokolovskaya understood Lev's need to rejoin the struggle. Sokolovskaya, who rarely saw Trotsky after that, always maintained a respectful loyalty to him. She never renounced him in the face of Stalinist repression and eventually paid with her life for that devotion.

Lev chose to leave at a time when "there was an epidemic of escapes," so many that the exiles had to adjust their pace in order to avoid overwhelming the system. Lev had to leave before autumn, when the roads became impassable. That August, he and a second exile hid themselves under hay in the back of a cart until they reached a railway station. His friends from Irkutsk provided him with respectable clothing. And he carried a false passport "made out in the name of Trotsky, which I wrote in at random, without even imaging that it would become my name for the rest of my life." Trotsky had been the name of one of his jailers in Odessa; it is possible that the

name's similarity to the German word for "stubborn" (*trotzig*) was what attracted him. The remainder of his escape "proved to be quite without romantic glamour." When he reached Samara, local Social Democrats, who were allied with Lenin and *Iskra*, took him in, gave him another pseudonym—*Pero*, or the pen—then asked him to visit major cities in Ukraine to meet with other revolutionaries. The trip proved to be fruitless; what people he found were ineffectual. By then, Lenin had learned of him and his literary and intellectual talents. Straightaway he sent an urgent message that Trotsky should report to *Iskra* headquarters in Europe.

With the help of the *Iskra* organization, Trotsky smuggled himself out of Russia into Austria. He reached Vienna and was welcomed by Dr. Victor Adler, the leader of the Austrian Social Democratic Party. Trotsky convinced Adler that "the interests of the Russian revolution demanded [his] immediate presence in Zurich," where Lenin awaited his arrival. Lenin, though, was now in London. With Adler's assistance, Trotsky reached England, by way of Zurich and Paris, in October 1902. It was early morning when he knocked three times on the door of Lenin's apartment, as he had been instructed to do. Lenin was still in bed when Nadezhda Krupskaya opened the door and warmly greeted the young man. "The 'pen' has arrived," she announced to Lenin. Thus Lenin and Trotsky met. Together, fifteen years later, they led an armed uprising in Petrograd.