Title: Trotsky’s Military Genius
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Academia is a database that promotes the free exchange of exceptional ideas and scholarly work, setting a platform on which to foment and improve student discourse
Leon Trotsky’s life is celebrated and his legacy still alive because he was one of the rare figures in history to demonstrate transcendental aptitude in both reflection and action. Few men can claim to have read and written as prolifically, developed a branch of the Marxist school of thought that still to date attracts intellectuals, while also experienced the thrill of delivering a speech to thousands of troops and spearheaded a revolution that would irreversibly change the face of the earth. The Civil War, which erupted in 1918 in response to the October Revolution and the policies implemented by the Sovnarkom in its wake, was the crucible of survival of the Bolshevik party, and by extension of Trotsky’s ability as a leader. In this period, he demonstrated his formidable aptitude to make the pen and the sword work in perfect harmony, and witnessed probably with a hint of awe how the theories he both read and wrote seamlessly translated into action. The purpose of this essay is to investigate why Trotsky was such an effective leader during the Civil War despite his utter lack of military experience. By understanding how his policies, which can be separated into military, ideological and organisational, affected the structure and functioning of the Red Army, one can gain an appreciation of how he alchemised his political experience into military prowess and become immortalised as a Great military leader. It will also shed some light on the broader but difficult gauge question of the extent of his role in the Bolsheviks’ complete victory, against all odds, over the myriad of factional enemies as early as 1921.

The Military Man

In order to establish what made Trotsky such an effective leader during the Civil War, it is firstly necessary to understand his development as a military man. One would be inclined to think that his complete lack of experience on the battlefield previous to 1918 would be a severe
hindrance to his capacities as a military strategist. However, Trotsky was above all else a thinker, and he used this capacity to gain tremendous insight into military theory through vicarious understanding. Such insight came firstly from his experience as a war journalist during the Balkan conflicts of World War One.\(^1\) Despite never witnessing a battle, this gave him a basic appreciation of military affairs, which was sharpened when he was invited to become war correspondent for newspaper Kievskaya Mysl in November 1917.\(^2\) His articles from that period already demonstrate a sound understanding of strategy, and the military historian Colonel Harold Nelson went as far as to claim that: 'In retrospect Trotsky appears to have been a better strategist than those found on the Bulgarian general staff.'\(^3\) He also made surprisingly correct predictions such as foreseeing the popularisation of the tank.\(^4\)

He underpinned his experience as a war correspondent with extensive military theory literature. The authority most cited in his works was Clausewitz, whose main point was that war was nothing more than a continuation of politics by other means.\(^5\) Trotsky believed that this applied particularly to civil wars, and that politics should dominate strategy, tactics and organisation. 'He saw the civil war as an integral part of the revolution, as an extension of the class struggle culminating in the consolidation of political power.'\(^6\) However, Trotsky did not advocate the ‘Single Military doctrine’, which was advanced by Communist theorists in 1918 and proposed a specifically Marxist, proletarian, revolutionary theory of military affairs. It worked under the assumption that since ‘…the working class will be compelled by the very

\(^1\) T.Cliff, *The sword of the revolution 1917-1923*, p57  
\(^2\) Ibid p60  
\(^3\) H W Nelson, *Leon Trotsky and the Art of insurrection 1905-1917*, p63-64  
\(^4\) Trostky, *Shochineniia*, volume 9, p190  
\(^5\) T.Cliff, *The sword of the revolution 1917-1923*, p60  
\(^6\) Ibid p63
course of the historical process to pass over to the offensive against capital\textsuperscript{7}, it would follow that this must be the basis for the tactics of the Red Army. He demolished this reductionist theory and highlighted the dangers of using Marxist ideology as an absolute when he said: 'Marxism can be applied with great success even to the history of chess. But it is not possible to learn to play chess in a Marxist way'.\textsuperscript{8} In this metaphor he displays his understanding that military doctrines cannot be reduced to politics alone but should be viewed as an entirely independent discipline permeated at every level by politics. This understanding of war can be traced to his faith in trained military experts and his unshakable support for such people throughout the civil war regardless of their previous allegiances and political beliefs.

Thus when Trotsky became the Commissar for War and President of the Supreme War Council on March 4th 1918, he saw the civil war as offering 'immense scope for real initiative and real military creativity'\textsuperscript{9} which made him often push for a flexible response to events that often contrasted sharply with the unilateral strategy of the Communist leaders. For instance, when Denikin's army took control of almost all of Ukraine and was marching towards Moscow in June 1919, Trotsky called for an unconventional alternate strategy to that of Kamenev focused on preventing a rapprochement of the White armies, but no one supported him until it became overwhelmingly obvious that he was right.\textsuperscript{10} His proposed strategy could have stemmed from his unique experience with factionalism as a ‘free agent’ during the period of the Menshevik / Bolshevik rift which made him masterful at exploiting the ideological disunity, which permeated the White armies. Trotsky’s ‘philosophy of war’ also made him more disposed than his Communist comrades to observe and learn from his enemies, which can be seen in his stress on

\textsuperscript{7} M Frunze, \textit{Sobranie Sochinenii}, p207
\textsuperscript{8} Trotsky, \textit{HRA}, volume 2, p143
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid p227
\textsuperscript{10} T.Cliff, \textit{The sword of the revolution 1917-1923}, p127
the importance of horseback men in his article 'Proletarians, To horse!'\textsuperscript{11} after witnessing the success of Denikin’s cavalry raids throughout 1918. Even though there was little support for the revolution in the steppes far removed from the industrial centres where the majority of Cossack riders were from, he nevertheless expended resources on enlisting their help wherever possible and this greatly bolstered the drastically lacking manoeuvrability of the Red Army.

Thus Trotsky derived a multilateral and effective strategy from his knowledge of how to alchemise political power into military power, combined with his understanding that war often required compromises in ideology that most Communist leaders were often not willing to make. On the whole his decisions were overwhelmingly right, and in many instances he most likely safeguarded the collapse of the Red Army, such as when he convinced Lenin to not abandon Petrograd when it seemed doomed in October 1919.\textsuperscript{12} His political genius, and awareness that it must be adaptable, dominated his role in the Red Army and marked him down in history as a Great military leader.

The Spirit of the Red Army

Trotsky was perfectly comfortable adapting the Bolshevik politics to suit his practical needs during the civil war, but his brilliance as a leader also came from his awareness that he had to maintain at least the appearance of a unified ideology to underpin the spirit of the Red Army. He had studied extensively the French Revolution, and the crucial point that he drew from his studies was that troops fighting for what they believed in were vastly superior to ordinary mercenaries and conscripts.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} T.Cliff, \textit{The sword of the revolution 1917-1923}, p128
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid p130
\textsuperscript{13} Trostky, \textit{Shocheniiia}, volume 9, p190
In order to attain such a mindset in the Red Army, Trotsky first and foremost utilised his oratory skills and inspiring presence to create a cult of personality of sorts amongst the troops. The large majority of soldiers in the Red Army were neither Communist party members nor even proletariat workers. Rather, Trotsky had to convince hordes of peasant conscripts that they were fighting for a worthy cause. He describes how he went to speak to a regiment of peasant deserters: 'I asked them to lift their hands in loyalty to the revolution. The new ideas infected them before my very eyes... Later on, regiments of Riazan 'deserters' fought well at the front'.

Although Trotsky is notorious for overstating his importance, his charisma must undoubtedly have had a huge impact on the malleable minds of the uneducated peasantry. Furthermore his impact on the morale of the troops was echoed by countless sources. His famous armoured train was seen as the heart of the Red Army and had an immeasurable psychological effect on the troops and was claimed to have changed the course of many battles. Gusev, a Communist party member, later a supporter of Stalin and a critic of Trotsky (and thus a reliable source in this instance), describes how 'With Trotsky's train...there came a firm will to victory, a new sense of initiative, and resolute pressure in all phases of the army work'. His train was such a powerful symbol because it established a direct link between Trotsky and his troops, and brought with it his judgement: it ‘educated, appealed, supplied, rewarded, and punished.'

While Trotsky used his persona to psychologically bolster his troops, he used other forms of propaganda to increase the efficiency of the Red Army. A prime example would be the policy of ‘honest reporting’ that he advocated throughout the Civil War, which he claimed was intrinsic to the virtue of ‘truth’, a weapon of Communism according to him. While in conventional wars

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14 Trotsky, *My Life*, p411-412
15 Ibid p399
16 Ibid p411
officers tend to downplay demoralising statistics such as casualties and desertion rates, Trotsky called for an accurate reporting of such numbers at every level of the military hierarchy. This allowed the army commanders to gauge the weaknesses and shortcomings of their units much more efficiently and thus tackle the root problems. Following such a policy also meant that soldiers would have much greater trust in their superiors, and thus one can clearly see in this instance how Trotsky used ideology to both benefit the spirit and the efficiency of the Red Army.

Trotsky also used the universal nature of Communist ideology to create an international face for the revolution. E. H. Carr writes that 'simultaneously with its creation, an appeal signed by three Americans appeared in Pravda... for recruits to an international detachment of the Red Army'. The international battalion created following this appeal had only a limited impact, comprising between 50 000 and 90 000 men but placed the Red Army in a global context and further helped to underpin the collective ideology. Trotsky used this international outlook to both encourage external revolutions and fuel the hatred for the intervening troops in 1919. This dual role is perfectly exemplified in his article 'The Two Britains', in which he starts by encouraging anger towards the British soldiers, and finishes by celebrating 'The Britain of labour... Long live worker's Britain, the Britain of labour, of the people'.

If ideological flexibility was necessary for the Bolshevik leaders during the Civil War, a facade of coherence was also necessary to give a purpose to the core of the Red Army. Trotsky was an outstanding military leader because he was fully conscious of this and used various forms of propaganda to psychologically elevate his troops above the aimless White soldiers.

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17 T.Cliff, The sword of the revolution 1917-1923, p90
19 T.Cliff, The sword of the revolution 1917-1923, p82
20 Trotsky, HRA, volume 2, pages 580-581
Organiser and Unifier

An army is always at the mercy of the context within which it exists: its structure will be a reflection of the society as a whole, and the military techniques used by its generals a function of the cultural, economical and technological factors of the epoch. The Red Army was no exception to the rule and was under constant threat from an overwhelming and atomised peasantry, a small and embryonic worker proletariat, and widespread poverty and un-education. Trotsky’s organisation of this fragmented society into a cohesive whole is no small feat, and the variety and imagination of the mechanisms he employed to achieve this merit consideration.

His first achievement was in recognising the need to form at least the core of the army with volunteers. The country was tired of bloodshed and furthermore appeal for Bolsheviks was largely based on its supposed striving for peace. He did this not out of virtue but necessity: 'volunteering is the only possible means of forming units with any degree of combat readiness under conditions in which the old army has broken down catastrophically along with all the organs for its formation and administration'.\(^{21}\) He also initially pushed for the election of officers, as he believed that 'the soldiers will obey and respect only elected authority'.\(^{22}\) However, both these policies were not compatible with the rapid expansion that the army was forced to undergo and were swiftly abandoned.

The core of volunteers gave Trotsky more grounds to implement conscription, but the large number of unwilling peasants nevertheless brought an element of instability. However they were generally kept under control due to their ambivalent attitude towards Bolsheviks: They '…supported the Bolsheviks who gave them the land, but opposed the Communists who

\(^{21}\) Trotsky, *HRA*, volume 1, p245
\(^{22}\) Lenin, *Works*, Volume 24, p100
requisitioned their grain - sometimes not realising that they were one and the same'.\textsuperscript{23} Trotsky had pushed for the Decree on Land to be amongst the first motions to be passed when the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, and he was able to use the leverage it provided him to keep the peasant conscripts in check during the Civil War.\textsuperscript{24} The Decree on Land also gave the peasantry something to lose in the instance of a victory of the Whites, which advocated the return of land to the aristocracy. To lead these new conscripts Trotsky enlisted the help of Tsarist officers, called ‘military specialists’ during the Civil War, often by threatening them or their families. He had to repeatedly convince Lenin, who advocated the exclusive use of Communist officers, that this was the right policy to follow, and his commitment to this despite the enemies it made him demonstrates his deep understanding of the prerequisites for victory.\textsuperscript{25}

Despite this, there was still a massive desertion in the Red Army, especially amongst the peasants. Trotsky used a ‘carrot and stick’ method to mitigate this: he offered deserters the possibility of reintegration into the army with no loss of status, but ordered for those that resisted arrest to be shot on sight. This method was largely successful, and out of the 2.8 million Red Army deserters in 1919, over 1.7 million were called back to duty.\textsuperscript{26} As part of his legislation on deserters, he also declared the chairmen of the soviets responsible for their fugitives. Imposing equally harsh discipline on all the levels of the Red Army hierarchy would become a recurrent trend in Trotsky’s policies. This system of ‘collective punishment’ meant that the entire military organ had a real interest in the optimal performance of the army. It was also meant as method of unifying the army by providing the soldiers of all ranks with a common negative incentive.

\textsuperscript{23} T.Cliff, \textit{The sword of the revolution 1917-1923}, p67
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid p67
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid p115
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid p68
Trotsky also managed to build a cohesive, integral army by encouraging friendly interaction between antagonistic subgroups. He sometimes did this in very subtle ways, such as through an article in 1918 stating that an officer should expect to be answered in the form that he addresses his soldiers (similarly to French, the Russian language has a formal and informal 2nd person singular) which encouraged mutual respect regardless of status. He also implemented the commissar system, borrowed from the French Revolution, in order to bridge the gap between local and centralised authority. These were 'irreproachable revolutionaries and immediate representatives of the Soviet Power’ that would work with the ‘military specialists’ and ratify their decisions. This level of centralisation was to counter the fact that many soldiers, particularly peasants, responded to local authority.

Trotsky was hoping to attain a higher form of discipline than the usual automatic discipline of the rod in the Red Army. He ultimately failed to see this collective awareness of purpose materialise on a large scale, but instead masterfully kept his troops in check through iron discipline and counter-pressures. His controversial methods, particularly the exploitation of Tsarist officers, earned him much hatred within the Communist party, but only through his pragmatism and forceful unification of the Red Army were the Bolsheviks able to achieve victory in the Civil War.

Conclusion

Having explored the manners in which Trotsky raised, defined and led the Red Army to victory, it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that he was a military genius that had perfect understanding of the mechanics of war. His literary background gave him the necessary

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27 T.Cliff, *The sword of the revolution 1917-1923*, p77
28 Trotsky, *HRA*, volume 1, p249
theoretical knowledge to complement his magnetic personality, which he sharpened in his years as a revolutionary. His willingness to put himself in the face of danger at the front and his awareness of the psychological power of symbols such as his armoured train allowed him to enjoy widespread popularity despite the iron discipline that he imposed. It is interesting to note how seamlessly he made use of repression considered harsh even in the eyes of his comrades when he deemed it necessary. It would seem that whatever sense of morality he had was completely overridden by his pragmatism which was motivated by his will to see the socialist revolution win at all costs. This would also explain why when the Bolshevik state was no longer under direct threat he returned to a more hardliner approach to Marxism-Leninism and opposed policies that compromised its integrity such as the New Economic Policy. The overarching theme in his leadership of the Red Army is an ability to adapt to situations and respond in a flexible and multilateral way. If Trotsky and not Stalin had outmanoeuvred his opponents and succeeded to Lenin, he would undoubtedly have been a very astute Cold War strategist. But in the context of the Civil War, Trotsky appears to be a rare case where a single man shaped the outcome of the world. It is very doubtful that without his organisational skills, military genius and unifying ideology under his personality cult the Bolsheviks would have won the civil war. His role in defining the Red Army was simply too profound to be able to imagine its appearance without him.

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