The history of Trotsky's papers

The History of Trotsky's Papers

Jean van Heijenoort

When the papers of Leon Trotsky were acquired by the Harvard Library — thanks to the generosity of John W. Blodgett, Jr., '23, and his daughter, Mrs. Katherine Winter, '63 — it was stipulated that, in order to protect Trotsky's associates, the exile correspondence, some 17,500 letters constituting about one third of the entire collection, remain closed until 1980. On 2 January these letters were opened to the public, and on 7 January an exhibition in the Houghton Library was inaugurated with the following talk by Professor van Heijenoort, who was Trotsky's secretary, translator, and bodyguard from 1932 to 1939.

— Eds.

We are here at the terminal point of a long trajectory. The initial point of that trajectory is Moscow, 1927. From there it passes through Alma-Ata, in Siberia near the Chinese border, then bends back to Prinkipo, a small island in the Marmara Sea; from Turkey, it goes on to Marseilles and Paris, then to Oslo and Hønefoss in Norway; from Norway the trajectory reaches Tampico, then Coyoacán, in the outskirts of Mexico City; and then, finally, it goes from Coyoacán to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Crates containing Trotsky's papers followed him in his odyssey, and the volume of his papers increased continually as the years went by. The papers that left Moscow with him were, first, his correspondence of the civil war, consisting mostly of copies of telegrams exchanged between him and Lenin during the years 1917–1921, and, second, the documents written during the Left Opposition's fight against Stalin in the years 1923–1927. This was the original nucleus around which began, in 1928 in Alma-Ata, a new crystalization of documents. During the year that Trotsky spent in Siberia his archives were enriched by correspondence that he was able to conduct with his fellow deportees. These people, men like Rakovsky and Solntsev, were talented men who until recently had occupied important positions in the Soviet state as diplomats, economists, and so on, and the correspondence exchanged during the year 1928 is based on an intimate knowledge of the machinery of the Soviet state. When I arrived in

Harvard University - Houghton Library / Harvard University. Harvard Library bulletin. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Library. Volume XXVIII, Number 3 (July 1980)

Prinkipo in 1932, there were shelves on the two sides of a long gallery on the second floor of the house, and there stood what we called the *papki* (folders, in Russian), containing the papers taken out of Russia. Many of them had not been opened since they had left Moscow and they were an object of marvel to us.

With Trotsky, the archives took, at the beginning of 1929, the long trip from Alma-Ata to Istanbul. One could ask why Stalin allowed Trotsky to take his papers with him. This is part of a bigger question: why did Stalin let Trotsky out of Russia? The answer to that question is not simple, and now is not the occasion to discuss it in detail. I will simply remark that, at that time, Stalin was still maneuvering with some of the members of the Politburo; he also thought, apparently, that, once Trotsky was abroad, it would be easier to brand him as a foreign agent. Of course, a few years later, Stalin began biting his fingers and regretting what he had done.

Once settled in Prinkipo, Trotsky began to write abundantly. There were what I call his large books, like *My Life* and the *History of the Russian Revolution*, plus a continuous flow of articles, plus a large correspondence. There were Trotskyist groups in perhaps thirty to forty countries in the world, and Trotsky constantly exchanged letters with their leaders, sometimes with rank-and-file members. He also corresponded with a number of persons who were not connected with a Trotskyist group. The letters received and copies of the letters sent were kept in files. We even had a special folder for letters from autograph-seekers and from cranks who offered him advice on how to save his soul or improve his health.

There are a number of what I call holes in the archives and, perhaps to help scholars, I now want to say a few words on this.

There was a fire in the villa Izzet Pasha, in which Trotsky was living in Prinkipo, at two o'clock in the morning in the night between 28 February and 1 March 1931. Fortunately, the fire was a kind of flash fire; the contents of closed closets remained untouched; folders were thrown through the windows by Jan Frankel. A large collection of pictures dating from the revolution and kept by Natalia Ivanovna in her room was burnt; also lost were a number of letters that Trotsky had recently received and had kept on his desk in order to answer them. All in all, however, very little was lost.

Other gaps in the archives come from the fact that Trotsky's life during his twelve years of exile, especially after his departure from

Turkey, was far from tranquil. In France, for months he was running from one place to another. In Norway, he was interned for four months in rather difficult conditions. All these circumstances were not propitious to an orderly filing of archives. In addition, Trotsky's collaborators changed quite frequently, and some of them had no special liking for keeping papers in order.

A big hole was punched in the archives in 1933. We went from Turkey to France in July 1933. The French government had granted a visa to Trotsky, with no explicit restriction. Nevertheless, the attitude of the French police presented an element of uncertainty. When the crates containing the archives were opened, Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son, took out what I would call the sensitive folders, those of leaders of the French and German Trotskyist groups (Pierre Naville, Raymond Molinier, Erwin Ackerknecht, and so on), and put them in what he considered to be a safe place. These folders never found their way back into the archives. Sedov also took out his own folder. He had left Prinkipo for Berlin in February 1931. Between February 1931 and July 1933 Trotsky had an extensive correspondence with him; two or three times a week, he would dictate a letter to his son to the Russian typist. These letters were very rich in content. The Sedov folder never came back to the archives, and to this day I do not know where it is.

In the night between 6 and 7 November 1937, a number of packages containing papers were stolen from a house where they had been stored, in the rue Michelet in Paris. The report of the French police stated that the door had been cut and the whole operation conducted with professional care. A gang of professional burglars had been sent from Moscow. Through Mark Zborowski, a Stalinist secret agent who had gained Sedov's confidence, Stalin's police knew in advance what there was in the house on the rue Michelet. After the theft, Sedov wrote to his father that the stolen bundles contained, for the most part, newspapers or newspaper clippings. It is hard to believe that Stalin's police brought a gang of professional burglars all the way from Moscow to Paris merely in order to steal some newspapers, knowing in advance what the bundles contained. So perhaps some of the folders taken out of the archives by Sedov were among the papers stolen from the rue Michelet.

I should also mention that part of Trotsky's papers, namely the civil war correspondence, was sold by him to the Amsterdam Institute

in 1935. That correspondence has been published in Russian and English.

I have indicated these gaps in the archives in order to help scholars to understand what is here and what is not. I would like to say a few words now about Trotsky's methods of work. Except when he was working on a historical book, like the one on Lenin or the one on Stalin, he was not a scholar digging in archives. His articles are concerned, most of the time, with the present and the future, not with the past. When he was writing them, he used the information brought to him by the daily newspapers. We kept the archives in good order, but there was relatively little use of them. Once in a while, when dictating a letter, he would ask me to dig out the copy of his previous letter to the same correspondent, but that was relatively rare. One exception to what I am now saying was the work for the Dewey Commission on the Moscow trials. Hearings were held in Coyoacán in April 1937. Before the commissioners arrived, we started to prepare. We searched the whole archives for documents refuting the false accusations made against Trotsky in Moscow. The *papki* were opened for the first time since they had left Moscow, letting escape the dust they had gathered. Every scrap of paper in the archives was scrutinized. One can catch a glimpse of that work by glancing at the two volumes, of hearings and of documents, published by the Commission.

How did the archives come to Harvard? Well, a bit by design and a bit by chance. By the end of 1938, after Munich, Trotsky felt, of course, that war was coming in Europe. He was convinced that in case of war Stalin would make an attempt on his life. He even predicted more or less exactly the time at which Stalin would do it. An attempt on his life might very well be an attempt on his papers also. The scenario that Trotsky had in mind was the following: the Mexican Stalinists would mobilize a crowd against the house in Coyoacán, two or three hundred people perhaps, who would surround the house. Taking advantage of the demonstration, some professional agents, at a certain point, would overcome the Mexican police garrison, enter the house, kill him, and set his papers afire. Trotsky had a very strong sense of history. He was convinced that his papers were important for future generations. Aside from the danger of destruction by Stalin's agents, the climatic conditions in Mexico were not very good for the preservation of papers. So Trotsky began to think about an American institution. Several were approached: Chicago University, the Hoover

Library in California, and Harvard. Each of these institutions sent a man to Mexico to examine the papers before signing a contract. I was the one there who showed the papers, and I remember these visits, in 1939. Why did the papers come to Harvard? I don't think there was any strong reason. At a certain point Trotsky was in favor of the Hoover Library, but probably Harvard moved a bit faster than the other institutions, and that's the way it was done.

For the sake of the sale, the papers were divided. Of course, Trotsky could not sell the papers he was still using, even creating, from day to day. So the cutoff date of 31 December 1936 was set. On that day Trotsky had been at sea between Oslo and Tampico. There was, for the last days of 1936 and the first days of 1937, a gap in the archives, and that seemed to be a convenient breaking point. So the first batch of papers sold to Harvard included everything until the end of 1936, and nothing was said about the other papers, because these were active files and they were growing every day. But in August 1940, shortly after the contract for the first part had been signed, Trotsky was murdered. Immediately after his death, Natalia Ivanovna and her lawyer and adviser, Albert Goldman, decided to have everything that was left in the house shifted to Cambridge. So all the papers in the new files, starting from 1937, were put in crates and sent to Harvard. Even Trotsky's Turkish passport, even his Mexican residence permit. These papers arrived at Harvard in the fall of 1940. They were deposited here, but had not yet been sold. The contract of sale was signed only in 1946. After the war, Natalia Ivanovna gathered a number of papers from various sources; in particular, documents that were sent back to her from Europe — not a large number, but important documents — and these again formed a new batch which was sold to Harvard in 1953.

Cutting across this chronological division, there is another division, based on contents and imposed by Trotsky himself. When his papers were sold to Harvard, Trotsky stipulated that his correspondence (received and sent) be closed for forty years. That delay was designed to secure the safety of a number of persons in Europe. It worked out very well. This correspondence formed the closed section that has now just been opened. I remember coming to Harvard for the first time, in the fall of 1940, to open the crates that had just arrived. At that time, the 1980s seemed to be the end of the world. But they came, as you can see.

I would like to offer a few words of advice to those who are going to use the archives. It is a complex batch of papers, in its extent and in its contents. My first advice would be not to have any short-term perspective. You must know a great deal in order to be able to do something well. Persons have to be identified, circumstances have to be reconstructed. My advice is to check and re-check everything. You will be greatly helped in that task by the three-volume catalogue compiled by Mr. Patrick Miche. A librarian, however, cannot read through every document and study all the circumstances in which it was written. He lays hold of names and dates, and has to go on. Sometimes, a piece of information cannot be obtained except by comparing one document with another document that is very far apart, which is beyond the work of a librarian. So you will find, in that catalogue, minor errors and discrepancies. I here make an appeal to the users of the catalogue to keep a record of any inaccuracy they find and give it to the librarian in charge at Houghton. We will devise machinery so that the catalogue can be improved by a kind of collective work. I must also say that, at the beginning, Mr. Miehe used, in good faith, Isaac Deutscher's book, and this book is notoriously deficient as far as dates, places, spelling of names and so on, are concerned.

Of course, some day some of these letters will be published, and this will involve several problems. Some of the letters were dictated by Trotsky in Russian, a beautiful Russian; it was his language; using it, he felt perfectly at ease, and it's there that one can best gauge and judge his style. His German and French were quite good. In Mexico he improved his English, and he learned Spanish to the point of reading newspapers and carrying on short conversations. He dictated letters in German, French, English. When he would dictate to me in French, there was always a certain interplay. I would straighten out his syntax. Sometimes he would insist on a certain turn of phrase, because he felt it was conveying his thought more exactly, although it was not quite correct in French; either he would succeed in imposing it on me or I would succeed in changing it. It was a similar situation when Trotsky was dictating in German or in English. We were to some extent shaping what he was dictating. Moreover, Trotsky would not give the punctuation while dictating; this was introduced by the secretary. Those who will prepare letters for publication should be aware of this situation. Most often, the letters cannot be printed as they are; that is, in a photographic way. Certain small things have to

be done: spelling, accents in French, and so on. Many of these letters were typed in difficult conditions, sometimes in great haste, sometimes on half-broken typewriters, sometimes on typewriters without the proper accents, and so on. Hence a certain amount of polishing up is unavoidable. But it has to be done in a very subtle way. The letters cannot be rewritten, of course; but there are slight changes that people will have to learn how to make in a very, very delicate way.

Finally, I want to speak on the significance of the correspondence, that is, of the part of the archives that has just been opened. One should not expect startling revelations on the political plane. Trotsky was not a man to have two sets of ideas, one presented in his published writings and one reserved for his private letters. The continuity on the political plane between the published writings and the correspondence will be apparent to all. There is no contradiction. The letters, however, add a great deal to the published writings. They add a new dimension. The published writings operate with political concepts, and it is not easy to feel the man behind the writings. Even Trotsky's autobiography, *My Life*, reveals little of his inner life. There is a lot of drama; we see Trotsky escaping from Siberia and racing through the steppes, but we don't know exactly what he feels. The correspondence is going to change that. Some letters are quite revealing about him as a man. The letters to Natalia Ivanovna, to his son Liova, to his daughter Zina will bring his inner life closer to us. But all the letters, if we read them carefully, contribute to a deeper understanding of his personality.

An important function of the correspondence is to reveal to us what Trotsky knew at a certain time on a certain topic. When, at a certain date, he was writing on Russia, what did he know exactly about what was going on in the top circles of the bureaucracy? The correspondence throws light on his sources of information and on the amount of information he had at his disposal at a certain time.

The letters were, of course, sent to correspondents; they reveal a great deal about Trotsky's ways of dealing with people. We can feel the tone of his relationship with a specific person. We see how he would handle people.

There is, of course, a recurring preoccupation through all the correspondence, namely, the building of the Trotskyist groups throughout the world. There were Trotskyist groups in thirty or forty countries. These groups were growing in very difficult conditions, persecuted

from all sides. Most of the time, each one was divided, in two, three, or four factions. It is hard to imagine the amount of time, effort, patience that Trotsky spent on that work. Only by going through the correspondence can one begin to gauge the extent of this activity of his during the twelve years of his exile. It was for him a constant object of preoccupation, to the point of disturbing his sleep and his daily life. All this begins to transpire when you read his letters.

There are about 17,500 documents, of which more than 4,000 are letters written by Trotsky himself. All of this has to be studied with care and attention. Those who are ready to give it that attention will get great rewards, and I wish them good luck.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Ralph W. Franklin, a professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, contributed an article to the July 1979 issue of the Bulletin; he is also the author of *The Editing of Emily Dickinson* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) and of a facsimile edition of the Dickinson fascicles, soon to be published by the Harvard University Press.

Mason Hammond, Pope Professor of the Latin Language and Literature, *Emeritus*, and Honorary Associate of Kirkland House at Harvard, is a member of the Harvard Class of 1925. Two of his recent books, both published by the Harvard University Press, are *The City in the Ancient World* (1972) and *Latin: A Historical and Linguistic Handbook* (1976); articles of his appeared in the July 1978 and July 1979 issues of the Bulletin.

Estrellita Karsh (Mrs. Yousuf Karsh) is a resident of Ottawa; she has written a number of articles on the history of medicine, including three lead articles for the *Encyclopedia Britannica's Medical and Health Annuals*.

Howard Plotkin, Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Medicine and Science at the University of Western Ontario, wrote his dissertation at Johns Hopkins University (1972) on Henry Draper and has contributed articles on Draper and on Pickering to *Isis* and other journals.

I. A. Shapiro is associated with The Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham and has contributed to the *Review of English Studies* and other bibliographical and philological periodicals.

Jean van Heijenoort, Professor of Philosophy, *Emeritus*, at Brandeis University, has edited works on mathematical logic published by the Harvard University Press, which also published his *With Trotsky in Exile* (1978).