

# Leon Trotsky: Cacti of the Revolution

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**Born in 1879, Lev Davidovich Bronstein, or Leon Trotsky, founder of the Red Army is known primarily for his revolutionary task.**



Nevertheless, behind the image of a politician, militant revolutionary, behind all the debates and false charges, we find a fascinating man. In Mexico, his last country of exile, he bred rabbits, went fishing offshore, went to the cinema, and made numerous field excursion and picnics, which were only excuses to bring back plants for his garden in Coyoacán. He converted his collection of succulents and cacti into a passion.

Some weeks later, he was murdered.

This article redraws the main lines of Trotsky's life, necessary for the understanding of the history, and naturally his passion for cacti and other succulents, just before his death.

## **A little bit of history...**

In 1896, Leon Trotsky SAID: *"My father wanted me to be an engineer. Then I hesitated between this and high mathematics, towards which I was very interested in, and the revolution which, little by little, seized me. All the times in which we conversed about this question. there was a serious crisis in the house. Everybody darkened, all suffered, my elder sister cried in secret, and nobody knew what to do. Above all, I looked to find myself. I was occasionally in conversation with workers, I got myself some illegal literature, I gave lessons, I made secret conferences with the superior class pupils of a professional school, I discussed with Marxists, we debated on Darwinism, we got ready in an indefinite way and we waited.*

*What was the immediate impulse which engaged us in revolutionary propaganda. It is difficult to answer this question. The impulse was internal.“*

In 1898, the police proceeded to mass arrests in the course of which Trotsky was arrested. He was transferred from one prison to another, at first to Nikolaïev then to Kherson, and then Odessa where he began to study in prison, also reading the political treatise “*What to do?*” by Lenin.

Finally, in 1900, Trotsky married: to Alexandra Lvovna Sokolovskaïa (one of the former leaders of the “South of Russia Labour Union“, in the creation of which he participated) in moscow prison, thus avoiding being separated from her, because he faced being deported to Oust-Kout in siberia. They had two daughters. In deportation and Trotsky established contact with the agents of the newspaper *Iskra* (*The Spark*). Lenin admitted him to the newspaper’s editorial staff committee.

Not withstanding any more confinement, he managed to escape in 1902, leaving his wife and his daughters behind him. His falsified passport was in the name of “Troktsky”, adopting the name of a guard of the prison of Odessa, which he chose maybe to hide his Jewish origin (A faith he did not practise), and which was kept as pen name. Under this false identity, he emigrated then to England. And while in London, he met Lenin.

During the summer of 1903, at the second congress of the POSDR (Left Social Democrat Workers of Russia) in London, which saw the split between The bolsheviks and The mensheviks, Trotsky ardently supported Lenin at first. However, the proposition by Lenin of a new editorial staff committee urged Trotsky to join the mensheviks. In September, 1904, when the positions of both groups diverged strongly, Trotsky broke with the mensheviks and moved closer to Parvus, seduced by his ambition to reunite the party and his theory of “permanent revolution“. At the same time, Trotsky kept his distance from Lenin, blaming him for his authoritarian methods and for his attitude, which he qualified as “jacobine“. He kept this intermediate position, but became isolated for thirteen years as he tried to merge both streams of social democracy. Then, Lenin denounced him as a traitor to the party.

In 1905, during the first Russian revolution, at the age of 26, he became vice-president then president of the Saint-Petersburg’s soviets, mainly made up of mensheviks. During the repression of the 1905 revolution, he was arrested, and then in 1907, condemned with fifteen other persons to life deportation in Siberia and removed of his civic rights. Immediately, in January, the convoy of convicts started towards Obdorsk (now Salekhard), towards the polar circle. After a 33-days journey, the convoy arrived at Berezov; from which village, there was still approximately 500 km to be made to finish the journey. They let prisoners walk quite freely in the village. as here, So far from everything, no evasion was to be expected; any attempt was condemned to failure



beforehand. But Trotsky did not hesitate. He dashed on a sled, driven by an old Yakut, through the desert of ice and snow in February. The police quickly abandoned any pursuit: there were few chances that the fugitive could survive. Nevertheless, Trotsky crossed 700 km of Siberian taiga in the snow and then began his second exile, in Vienna.



Founder of the newspaper *Pravda* in 1912 in Vienna, he defended the unity of all the social democrats, any merged tendencies, and including the most radical. Trotsky was a part of those socialists who continued to denounce the imperialist character of the 1914 war. Arrested, then expelled from France in September, 1916, he was led to Irun, in Spain. There, he was arrested by the Spanish police and embarked by force with his family to the United States. he Settled in New York from January, 1917, and contributed to the newspaper *Novy Mir* "New World". After the revolution of February, 1917, he adhered to the bolshevik party and asserted that his conciliatory position at that time was erroneous. as the Main artisan with Lenin of the October revolution, the Red Army was founded and became one of the essential factors in winning the 1918-1921 Russian civil war, HE became one of the most important leaders of the new bolshevik regime. During the civil war, he commanded the military destruction of the Makhnovchtchina [the insurgent army of Ukraine], which, in 1921, sounded the knell of anarchism in Soviet Russia, considered as "counter revolutionary".

### **A man who disturbed**

From 1923, the opposition found a leader in Trotsky. The bureaucratic system began to be embodied in Stalin. For that reason, a campaign of agitation with rare violence continued against Trotsky, denounced in any circumstances as the anti-Lenin, the bad genius of the party, the enemy of the bolshevik tradition, the enemy of the peasants.

From 1926, along with Zinoviev and Kamenev in unified opposition, he led a movement which opposed Stalin. This opposition resulted in him being excluded from the party on November 12th, 1927 and to be deported on Stalin's orders to Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan. Stalin eventually expelled him the USSR in February, 1929 to exile in Constantinople (Istanbul) in Turkey, and then he was placed under house arrest on the

island of Büyükada, in the archipelago of the Prince Islands, while the repression beat down on his partisans, who were sent to the Gulag. Stalin had several members of his family killed, among whom were his first wife, her brother, his sister, one of his sons and two of his sons-in-law. He wrote: *“In January, 1928, I was deported by the current Soviet government and I spent one year on the China border; I was expelled to Turkey, in February, 1929; I write these lines in Constantinople. Even if presented in an outline of my life, none of it could be said to be monotonous, On the contrary, if we consider all the bends, the unforeseen turns, the pointed conflicts, and the ups and downs, we can assert that my existence was rather abundant in ‘adventures’ Nevertheless, I say that I have nothing in common with the seekers of adventures. “*

During this exile, he wrote numerous works and continued to promote communism and the international revolution. He published a monthly bulletin of opposition in the Russian language from July, 1929. In April, 1930, he organized a conference which results in the implementation of a temporary international secretariat of the communist opposition.

Trotsky wrote: *“On February 20th, 1932, the Soviet bureaucracy deprived me, as well as the members of my family who were abroad, Soviet nationality. My daughter Zinaïda who was temporarily abroad for medical treatment was also deprived of the possibility of returning to the USSR to join her husband and her children.”*



Diego Rivera with an unknown, Frida Kahlo and Otto Ruhle with *Marginatocereus marginatus* in the background. (© Courtesy Library of the Harvard University).



Persecuted by the German police, she committed suicide on January 5th, 1933.

After four years spent in Turkey, he stayed in France, from July, 1933. His son, Serguei Sedov, stayed in the USSR, to be killed during the Big Stalinist Purges of the 1930s, along with his son-in-law Platon Ivanovitch Volkov and his mother-in-law Alexandra Sokolovskaïa. The daughter of Trotsky, Zinaïda Volkova, was authorized in 1931 to join him, she took her son, but had to leave her daughter in the USSR.

During his stay in France, false information, spread in the last days of 1934, under Georges Lecomte's father, member of the French Academy, this was transformed little by little into rumour: Trotsky would have found refuge in the Corrèze (region which "hides"), according to the author, "a material intended to arm the Spanish refugees". "The traitor of Brest Litovsk" or "the red dictator hands full of blood" such were the terms used to describe Trotsky, an author of "atrocious crimes" without knowing that it was believed by others that it was thanks to him that the butchery of 1914-18 came to an end.

### **The last exile**

In June, 1935, he was again expelled, and found refuge in Norway. Accompanied by a Norwegian policeman (Jonas Lie), he left Norway in September, 1936, to go and settle down in Mexico thanks to the president Lázaro Cárdenas who granted him political asylum. On his arrival on January 9th, 1937, Trotsky was received in the port of Tampico by Frida Kahlo, wife of Diego Rivera and transported to Mexico City aboard the presidential train, and was finally welcomed at Coyoacán in the Casa Azul "the blue House" of the painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. He would have had, as it is said, a romance with the later. In 1938, (a highly improbable fact, but it maintains the legend!). Stalin had his son, Leon Sédov, murdered in Paris. However, the most dangerous of the bolsheviks left was Trotsky himself who necessarily therefore must be killed.

In 1939, Trotsky moved his place of residence, not very far from the "Casa Azul", to the calle of Vienna, in Coyoacán. In this house, two attempts at his life were made, the first one of these was committed on May 24th, 1940. On the morning of the first effort, a commando group of 20 armed men commanded by the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, managed to penetrate the house thanks to the complicity of Robert Sheldon Hart, bodyguard of Trotsky, but one who was a double agent. The intruders fired 400 bullets with large-bore weapons. Siqueiros himself fired at the bed where Trotsky and his wife Natalia Sedova slept, without managing to get them, because the attacked managed to protect themselves near a wall. next to their bed. The Trotsky bodyguards repelled the aggressors who fled..

Some months later, on August 20th, 1940, Trotsky had a second attempt made on his life in the same house, but this time, it cost him his life. Stalin gave the order to murder Trotsky and, Jotov, in charge of operations, charged two Catalan communists, Caridad and Ramón Mercader (mother and son), to realize the plan. In the same way he had helped with the slaughter of both left-wing Mexicans, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Although the particular hotel in which Trotsky lived was strongly guarded, Ramón Mercader (known under the false identity of Jacques Mornard' alias Franck Jackson) managed to infiltrate by gaining the confidence of one of the secretaries of Trotsky, Silvia Ageloff, his fiancé, in premeditation to commit his crime. The thoughtful and generous Fiancé of Sylvia, who had invited the bodyguards to the best restaurants of Mexico City, was a man who showed a total indifference to the politics, and was in fact a vulgar agent of the GPU.

Under the excuse to read one of his papers, Mercader approached Trotsky and while Trotsky was reading, he wildly nailed him with an ice pick to the back of the head. The shouts of Trotsky rang throughout the house. The murderer was arrested by Joseph Hansen and Charles Cornell, two American activists who were his bodyguards and secretaries. The latter was present at the time of the murder but did not manage to prevent it. Trotsky, asked him not to kill the assassin but to get a confession about who ordered the attempt.

León Trotsky died one day later in a hospital in Cruz Verde. It is necessary to underline that at his burial, three hundred thousand people attended, in a city which then, totalled hardly four million inhabitants. Ramón Mercader was handed over to the Mexican police and condemned to 20 years of solitary confinement, the maximum punishment in Mexico; then, Mercader was decorated with the order of Lenin in the USSR...

## **Leon Trotsky and cacti**

Obviously, I wanted to know a little more about what nobody speaks of in his life, his rising passion for cacti. Thus, I concentrated my investigation on Alex Buchman, a North American sympathizer and admirer who was also fascinated by photography, because He is the person who made in fact the never published photos for which I am looking and which are untraceable, even on internet.

Actually, in the 80s, Buchman bequeathed a selection of his photos and films to academic institutions and among these, to the University of Harvard (USA), among which archives, contain the voluminous bundles of Trotsky's papers. The material given up by his author containing 102 photos in black and white, selected from approximately 700 negatives. Dozens of these photos were reproduced in books and also in posters; but some were offering the condition of "unpublished", and these were exactly what interested me.



Thus, I contacted the University of Harvard, and very quickly i was in touch with Emilie Hardman, who kindly helped me in my search. Her kindness and effective collaboration allowed me to find the Buchman documents and to acquire the rights for the publication of some very moving photos, but especially to discover an unknown Trotsky. The value of the images lies in the fact that they show an aspect of Trotsky's character in the intimacy of his daily life. At first, contrary to what was officially spread, these images contrast absolutely with the version offered by some authors who, in an unkind way, supported that, "at the end of his life, Trotsky felt dejected and that he had even lost the desire to live." aspect.

However, we discover a man of about sixty years old, rather healthy, full of life and enthusiasm, with white and rather muddled hair. The material which I have constitutes a blatant denial in this type of assertion and is the best testimony of the optimism of which Trotsky always gave evidence. The face shows enjoyment and tranquility. They are moments in the course of which he seems to feel younger.

"Natalia, we are still alive". It is what Trotsky said almost every morning to his inseparable wife Natalia Sedova, when a ray of light entered their dark bedroom, the place where they had supernaturally escaped an attempt on their lives, he told his grandson, Esteban Volkov "To die is not a problem when a man carries out his historic mission".



Leon Trotsky & Natalia Sedova behind one Opuntia sp. (© Courtesy Library of the Harvard University).



Leon Trotsky, taking a picture of his wife, Natalia Sedova. (© Courtesy Library of the Harvard University).

Natalia often went out in the afternoon, in the hall of her house with her samovar, to serve some tea to the Mexican workers and to the international bodyguards in charge of their security and “started some interesting conversations in various languages”,

During the weekends, Trotsky, with his small family, his friends, co-workers and guests, participated in campaigns close to Coyoacán, where they organized picnics among Opuntias. There, in a picture depicting Trotsky photographing Natalia, we can note her, showing a premature ageing and an expression of sadness (at the time of these images, she had lost her two sons: Lev and Serguei). In these picnics, Trotsky exerted himself physically, by walking a lot and by collecting cacti and agaves which he would transplant to the garden of his house. The majority of the cacti taken are rather big and sometimes of a considerable weight, like some *Marginatocereus marginatus*, which we can see standing, and whose cut trunks form new stems at the apex. Others seem to be old specimens of undetermined, hairy Mammillarias.

The photos of A. Buchman, taken in March, 1940, present Trotsky, with pickaxe and shovel, in full work, and on others loading on to shoulders the invaluable booty.



I tried to identify cacti and succulent plants, notably the agave, *A. inaequidens*. We can wonder why Trotsky is tearing away an agave at the beginning of flowering, which is going to die. In fact, it is likely that during this time, when people did not worry to propagate these plants, it would be simply pleasant and spectacular to be able to admire this flowering in his garden.

In a colour film from the same Buchman, Trotsky is observed, dressed with a reddish jacket, trying hard to collect one of these plants, work in which he is assisted by his secretaries and by the Mexican policeman Jesús Casas, in charge of his security. After such days, the participants felt emptied and somewhat tired! In my opinion, the energy which Trotsky spent during these excursions of collecting, was remarkable.

Buchman stayed in Coyoacán up to the middle of April 1940, then returned to the United States. He was far from imagining that four months after his departure, Trotsky would be murdered. These photos of his cacti and agave collection are probably the last images of Trotsky before his death.



Leon Trotsky, collecting an Agave to be transplanted in his garden. (© Courtesy Library of the Harvard University).



Leon Trotsky, back from collecting *Mammillarias* spp.  
(© Courtesy Library of the Harvard University).

“In Trotsky, what surprises is at first the hatred against him, by Stalin, Churchill, or Hitler or whoever. We are struck by the serenity of the one who is the object of so much aversion, the sense of the measure of this man who, although he hated and instigated the hatred of class against the oppressor and the exploiter, never seems animated by a resentment, a spite, a personal desire of revenge and contents with analyzing these feelings as some of the multiple springs which give the contents of the consciousness of the action, finally the mass politics.”

Today, his ashes rest with those of Natalia in his house which became a garden-museum, surrounded by his beloved cacti of which he took so little advantage.

Text: JL, photos: University of Harvard Library, Cambridge, MA, USA, with permission

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Leon Trotsky, back from collecting cacti (© Courtesy Library of the Harvard University).