

*R. H. McNeal*

A LETTER FROM TROTSKY TO KRUPSKAYA,  
17 MAY 1927

The relations between L. D. Trotsky and N. K. Krupskaya were never very friendly, although Trotsky, in his emigrant writings, tried to create the impression that they were close comrades.<sup>1</sup> They first met in London in October, 1902 when Trotsky arrived shortly before dawn, direct from Siberian exile. Although they became acquainted, they were hardly close associates in the nine months between Trotsky's arrival and his split with Lenin at the Second Party Congress in July-August 1903. During the years of enmity between Lenin and Trotsky, 1903-1916, Krupskaya was anything but friendly with Trotsky, reserving some of her sharpest critical comments for him in her correspondence with comrades.

After the October Revolution she naturally accepted her husband's political reconciliation with Trotsky, but had little contact with him, except for a brief time when the two households shared a dining room in the Kremlin. During Lenin's illness Krupskaya favored the ruling troika of Kamenev-Stalin-Zinoviev, partly because of her close personal association with Kamenev and Zinoviev in emigration. In early January, 1924, she specifically supported the ruling group and criticized Trotsky's "New Course" article. No doubt Trotsky considered her an opponent, and a particularly inconvenient one, because of her close association with the image of Lenin.

It seems, however, that Krupskaya was not completely committed in the factional struggle. No doubt her quarrels with Stalin played a major role in persuading her that the troika could not by itself replace Lenin, that Trotsky's continued role as a party leader was necessary. Very shortly after Lenin's death on January 21, 1924, Krupskaya wrote a personal note to Trotsky, telling him of Lenin's continued high esteem for him until the end of his life and implicitly offering a

<sup>1</sup> A fuller narrative of their relationship than that which follows may be found in my book *Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin* (Ann Arbor, Michigan and London, 1972). This work provides source references concerning the particulars that follow in this introductory note.

personal reconciliation. Trotsky later took great pride in this letter, but at the time he seems to have given it not even the courtesy of a reply. Perhaps this was simply part of his physical or psychosomatic illness, which rendered him apathetic even to the need to rush from his resting spot in the Caucasus to Lenin's funeral. Perhaps he was not ready to forgive Krupskaya for her support of his enemies. Trotsky's silence at the special meeting on May 22, 1924, the eve of the Thirteenth Party Congress, at which the question of distributing Lenin's testamentary letters to the Congress was discussed, and rejected, was another instance of Trotsky's unwillingness to offer Lenin's widow his encouragement. At the Congress itself she nevertheless came to his defence, and was fairly successful in silencing the troika's anti-Trotsky polemics.

Trotsky still made no overture to Krupskaya, and her own oppositional stance became linked with Kamenev and Zinoviev in 1925. Only after the formation of a united opposition, in mid-1926, linking Kamenev-Zinoviev with Trotsky, did Krupskaya find herself in the same camp with Trotsky, and even then it seems that she had very little direct contact with him. Her most dramatic contribution to the united opposition was the smuggling of Lenin's testament to Max Eastman in the fall of 1926, and this she undertook on her own, not long before the temporary capitulation of the opposition leaders to the Central Committee in October, 1926. This retreat, which contrasted sharply with Krupskaya's act of defiance, seems to have ended once and for all her willingness to work with the leaders of the united opposition, Trotsky included. On November 3, 1926, Stalin told the Fifteenth Party Conference that Krupskaya had left the opposition.

This did not mean that she had already become a supporter of the Central Committee (Stalin). In public she was silent on the entire matter, and the following document suggests that her position was sufficiently neutral that the united opposition, making its final effort in 1927, believed that she could be won back. It appears that Zinoviev, her closest friend in the opposition, wrote to her first, attempting to persuade her to rejoin the opposition.<sup>1</sup> The date was probably between the middle of April and the middle of May, the period in which the united opposition resumed vigorous activity in response to the Shanghai massacre of Communists by Kuomintang forces. The internal evidence of the following document also indicates that Krupskaya's reply was less an argument against the opposition than a brief dismissal of their position on the ground that the issues they had chosen were not vitally important – "a fuss". This fits in with her past record of opposition,

<sup>1</sup> See second paragraph of the following document.

which had emphasized domestic issues rather than foreign policy.

Having been shown Krupskaya's letter to Zinoviev, Trotsky now attempted to bring his eloquence to bear. The letter which follows is preserved in the original typescript (with handwritten corrections) by Trotsky in the Trotsky Archive of the Harvard University Library.<sup>1</sup> While Trotsky presumably thought that there was some chance to persuade Lenin's widow to lend her prestige to the opposition once again, it also seems that he regarded this as a useful tract for circulation in the opposition underground, which at that time was still able to reproduce and disseminate modest quantities of propaganda. This is suggested by another document in the Trotsky archive, a retyped copy of the letter to Krupskaya, bearing the title *K voprosu "samokritiki"* (Concerning the Question of "Self-Criticism").<sup>2</sup> This version omits the salutation and closing expression of personal good wishes, but is otherwise the same. The copy sent to Krupskaya evidently did not contain any explicit indication that it might be disseminated to a wider audience, although the titled copy surely seems to have been intended for such a purpose.

"Open letters" to this or that person have their function, but it is rarely to win agreement from their ostensible addressee. Usually that person is being implicitly accused of something, and the arguments are aimed more at a wider public than the addressee. Trotsky does not seem to have been very sensitive to this problem. His handwritten, closing personal note strongly suggests that he thought that Krupskaya might in fact read the letter sympathetically, but most of it is couched in accusatory tones. With incredible insensitivity to her pride as the first Leninist and incredible blindness to his own erratic record as a Leninist (as it must have appeared to Krupskaya, and anyone who was not a Trotsky disciple), he berates her for her alleged mistakes and seems to expect a simple capitulation in accepting the opposition line.

This technique was doomed to futility. It appears that Krupskaya did receive the letter, for an implicit answer appeared in *Pravda* as a letter to the editor on May 20, 1927 – three days after the dating of the Trotsky letter. No personal reply exists in the Trotsky archive, possibly because Krupskaya felt that this was irrelevant once open letters had become the medium of exchange. Her letter to the editor was not dated, a somewhat puzzling detail. She did not specifically defend the Central Committee line, but stressed the need for restraint in "self-criticism". The opposition, she said, had gone too far, "quantity was

<sup>1</sup> The present writer is greatly indebted to the Harvard University Library and the late Merle Fainsod for permission to publish the text of this letter. It bears the Trotsky Archive number T950.

<sup>2</sup> Harvard University, Trotsky Archive number T951.

transformed into quality, comradely criticism became factionalism”, the workers would feel that the “basic principles of the party and Soviet power” were in question.

As a self-styled “Bolshevik-Leninist”, Trotsky did not wish to acknowledge that Lenin’s widow had rebuffed him on this occasion, and his letter was never published by him or his followers. It is time that it is made available, as a concise summation of Trotsky’s ideological position at this critical juncture and a record of Trotsky’s inability to understand Nadezhda Krupskaya.

Л. Троцкий

Письмо Крупской

17.V.27.

Дорогая Н.К.<sup>1</sup>

Пишу Вам на машинке, чтобы не затруднять разбором почерка, который с годами не стал лучше.

Читал Ваше письмо. Хотя оно адресовано лично Г.Е. [Зиновьеву], но ведь дело совсем не личное, поэтому позволяю себе высказаться.<sup>2</sup>

Более всего меня поразило слово „буза”. Это слово употребил на последнем Пленуме Кассиор по поводу наших речей о разгроме китайских рабочих и об нашей капитуляции перед английским меньшевизмом.<sup>3</sup> Кто в этих вопросах прав: мы или Сталин? Или есть какая-то третья позиция? Разве можно говорить о „бузе”, не ответив, по ленински, на этот коренной вопрос?! „Буза” – это значит склока по ничтожному поводу или совсем без повода. Что же, разгром китайских рабочих нашим „союзником” Чан-Кай-Ши, которого мы питали, одевали, обували, рекламировали, приказывая китайским коммунистам подчиняться ему, – что же это, мелочь, пустяк, мимо которого можно пройти? А то, что мы пред лицом всего мира заявили о нашем *единодушии* с насквозь проституированными английскими меньшевиками в самый разгар их подлой работы по отношению к английскому пролетариату, Китаю и нам? Что же это: шуточка, мелочь? И наша критика – это „буза”?!

Можно было еще сомневаться, в какой мере симптоматичны и тревожны такие факты, как избирательная инструкция, как „обогащайтесь” и пр.<sup>4</sup> Но может ли быть, в свете последних событий, хоть малейшее сомнение насчет того, что *Сталин и Бухарин изменяют большевизму в самой его сердцевине* – в пролетарском революционном интернационализме. Ведь в вопросе об отношении к китайской „национальной” буржуазии *вся история большевизма, начиная с 1904 года, когда впервые встал по-настоящему этот вопрос, идет на смарку.*

Н.К., Вы ни слова не говорите о том, верна ли позиция Сталина или наша – в вопросе, от которого зависит весь ход китайской революции и весь курс Коминтерна. Вы только повторяете брошенное Кассиором слово „буза”.

Вы говорите, что самокритика одно, а критика со стороны – другое. Но ведь Вы же член ЦКК, почему же Вы не обеспечите членам партии возможности самокритики? Ведь мы же просили Политбюро и Президиум ЦКК собрать закрытое заседание Пленума без стенограмм, чтобы обсудить положение по существу. Конечно, мы собирались там драться до последней возможности за основные принципы большевизма в основных вопросах мировой революции. Но ведь нам в этом отказали. Почему же не выходит „самокритики”? Еще совсем недавно мы вместе с Вами говорили, что самокритики не выходит потому, что у нас *нездоровый режим, грубый и нелояльный*.<sup>5</sup> Что же, режим стал лучше за последнее полугодие? Или вопросы, требующие самокритики сегодня, слишком мелки и ничтожны? „Буза”?

Мы, революционное крыло партии, терпим поражения. Да, бесспорно. Но мы терпим поражения того же типа, какие большевизм терпел в 1907–1912 г.г. Поражение немецкой революции 1923 г., поражение в Болгарии, в Эстонии, поражение генеральной стачки в Англии, поражение китайской революции в апреле – чрезвычайно ослабили международный коммунизм. Процесс этот имеет двойное выражение: с одной стороны – чрезвычайно уменьшилось за эти годы число членов коммунистических партий и число получаемых ими голосов, а с другой стороны, внутри коммунистических партий чрезвычайно усилилось оппортунистическое крыло. Разве мы выключены из этого мирового процесса? Тягчайшие поражения мировой революции и медленность нашего роста бьют, разумеется, и по нашему пролетариату. Этого не понимают бюрократические тупицы, которые думают, что пролетариат настраивается по шпаргалкам агитпропа, а не по мировым социальным и политическим процессам. Понижение международно-революционных настроений нашего пролетариата есть факт, который усиливается партийным режимом и ложной воспитательной работой („социализм в одной стране” и пр.). Мудрено ли, что в этих условиях левому, революционному, ленинскому крылу партии приходится плыть против течения? *Нас громят тем более ожесточенно, чем более наш прогноз подтверждается фактами*. Это совершенно закономерно и неизбежно для подлинно марксистского крыла в период временного, но глубокого снижения революционной кривой. Но мы, и только мы, сохраняем идейную преемственность революционного большевизма, учимся и учим – без Ленина –

применять ленинский метод анализа того, что совершается и предвидения того, что готовится. Разве мы не предупреждали партию о неизбежном разгроме безоружного пролетариата вооруженным нами Чан-Кай-Ши? Разве мы не предсказывали почти год тому назад позорной берлинской капитуляции перед теми принципами, борьбе с которыми была посвящена почти вся жизнь Владимира Ильича? И разве неправильны наши указания на то, что *ложный курс внутренней политики может обнаружиться в грозных для нас формах в случае войны?* И разве не обязаны мы со стократной энергией кричать об этом сейчас, пока еще не поздно? И разве это „буза“? Неужели это „буза“?

„Борьбу на истощение“ против оппозиции, ведущуюся за последнее полугодие, Сталин решил теперь заменить „борьбой на истребление“. Почему? Потому что Сталин стал слабее; его банкротство в китайском и англо-русском вопросе очевидно, как и тяжкие последствия этого банкротства для нашего международного положения. На Сталина нажимает растущее правое крыло: зачем лез в генеральную стачку и в Китай? Зачем дразнить Чемберлена, вызывать опасности интервенции? – будем строить социализм в одной стране. Вот то *основное, почвенное, коренное течение данного момента, которое „побеждает“ нас сейчас.* Именно потому, что Сталин стал неизмеримо слабее – под ударами глухой критики справа и нашей полузадушенной критики слева – он и вынужден свою борьбу на истощение заменять борьбой на истребление. Вопрос идет не о мелочах и не о поправочках, а об основной линии большевизма в основных вопросах. Кто говорит „буза“, тот предлагает нам плыть по течению в таких условиях, когда течение направлено против большевизма.

Нет, Н.К., на это мы не пойдем. Мы будем плыть против течения, даже если Вы вслух повторите за Кассиором слово „буза“. И никогда мы не чувствовали так глубоко и безошибочно своей связи со всей традицией большевизма, как сейчас, в эти тяжкие дни, когда мы и только мы готовим завтрашний день партии и Коминтерна.

От души желаю Вам доброго здоровья.<sup>6</sup>

[Translation]

L. Tro[tsky]

Letter to Krupskaya

17.V.27.

Dear N.K.,<sup>1</sup>

I am writing you on a typewriter so that you won't have to bother deciphering my handwriting, which did not improve with the years.

I read your letter. Although it was addressed personally to G. E. [Zinoviev], its subject is, to be sure, far from personal so I therefore permit myself to speak out about it.<sup>2</sup>

Most of all, I am struck by the word "fuss". Kosior used this word at the last plenum in relation to our speeches on the crushing of the Chinese workers and our capitulation before English Menshevism.<sup>3</sup> Who is right in these questions: we or Stalin? Or is there a third position? Can one really speak of a "fuss" not having answered, in accordance with Lenin, to this essential question?! "Fuss" – this signifies a squabble of little or no importance. What is this, the crushing of the Chinese workers by our "ally" Chiang Kai-shek, who is fed, clothed, shod, and acclaimed by us, while we order the Chinese Communists to subordinate themselves to him – is it a detail, a trifle, which we can pass over? Or again, that we declared before the whole world our *unity* with the thoroughly prostituted English Mensheviks while their foul work in relation to the English proletariat, China and ourselves is in full swing? What is this: a joke, a trifle? And our criticism – is this a "fuss"?!

Perhaps it is still possible to doubt the extent to which such facts as the electoral instruction, "enrich yourselves" and so forth, are symptomatic and alarming.<sup>4</sup> But, in the light of the recent events, can there be even the slightest doubt that *Stalin and Bukharin are betraying Bolshevism at its very core* – proletarian revolutionary internationalism. In the question of our relations with the Chinese "national" bourgeoisie,

<sup>1</sup> In Trotsky's handwriting to this point.

<sup>2</sup> This letter is lost or inaccessible.

<sup>3</sup> S. V. Kosior (ancient spelling Kassior) was a rising Stalinist in the mid-twenties, a member of the Central Committee and Secretariat. The Central Committee plenum at which he spoke of a "fuss" must have been that of April 13-16, 1927. No resolutions of this plenum dealing with the disputed issue are available, but the communiqué of the meeting (*Pravda*, April 19, 1927) states that it "heard and considered the Politburo communication concerning the decisions that it adopted in connection with recent international events (events in China and others)".

<sup>4</sup> The "electoral instructions" may be the party resolution "On the Re-election of Soviets", in: *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, Vol. 6, Part 1, p. 631. The slogan "enrich yourselves" was proposed by N. I. Bukharin in April, 1925 with respect to the peasants under the New Economic Policy.



surely *the entire history of Bolshevism, starting with 1904 when this question was first actually posed, goes for naught.*

N. K., you do'n't say a word on this point: is Stalin's position or ours correct concerning the question on which the whole course of the Chinese Revolution and the whole course of the Comintern depend. You merely repeat the word that Kosior tossed off, "fuss".

You say that self-criticism is one thing and criticism from the outside another. But are you not a member of the Central Control Commission, so why do you not secure for party members the possibility of self-criticism? Have we not asked the Politburo and Presidium of the Central Control Commission to convene a closed session of the plenum, without taking the minutes, in order to discuss the essence of the situation. Of course, we intended to make a last-ditch fight there for the basic principles of Bolshevism in the basic issues of world revolution. But they have not denied us this request. Why indeed is there no "self-criticism"? Not so long ago we both said that self-criticism does not develop because we have *an unhealthy regime, crude and disloyal.*<sup>5</sup> Do you really think that the regime improved during the last half year? Or are the questions that require self-criticism today too petty and insignificant? "A fuss"?

We, the revolutionary wing of the party, have suffered a defeat. That is indisputable. But we have suffered a defeat of the same sort that Bolshevism suffered in 1907-1912. The defeat of the German revolution in 1923, the defeat in Bulgaria, in Estonia, the defeat of the general strike in England, the defeat of the Chinese revolution in April have severely weakened international communism. This process has a two-fold expression: on one hand, in these years the number of members of communist parties, and the number of votes they received were severely diminished, and, on the other hand, the opportunist wing was greatly strengthened. Are we really excluded from this world-wide process? The grave defeats of the world revolution and the slowness of our growth surely have an impact on our proletariat, too. The bureaucratic blockheads do not understand this. They think that the crib sheets of the *agitprop* and not the world-wide social and political processes determine the outlook of the proletariat. The subsidence of the international revolutionary mood of our proletariat is a fact, which is reinforced by the party regime and deceitful educational work ("Socialism in one country" and so forth). In these conditions is it any wonder that the left, revolutionary, Leninist wing of the party has to swim against the stream? *The more our forecast is sustained by the facts, the more furiously they rant against us.* This proceeds entirely

<sup>5</sup> This is an allusion to the famous "Postscript" to Lenin's testimonary letter. See Lenin, *Sochineniia* (4th ed.), pp. 545-546.



from social laws and is inevitable for the genuinely Marxist wing in a period of a temporary but deep dip in the revolutionary curve. But we, and only we, preserve the ideological succession of revolutionary Bolshevism, learning and teaching – without Lenin – to apply the Leninist method of analysis to that which is being done, and of prevision of that which is being prepared. Did we not warn the party about the inevitable defeat of the unarmed proletariat by Chiang Kai-shek, whom we armed? Did we not predict almost a year ago the shameful Berlin capitulation before those principles that Vladimir Ilyich dedicated almost all his life to struggling against? And were we wrong in stating that *the deceitful course of internal policy might take on forms that are a menace to us in case of war*? And now, while it is still not too late, are we not obliged to raise an outcry about this with one-hundred-fold force? Is this really a “fuss”? Can it possibly be a “fuss”?

Stalin has now decided to change the “war of attrition” that has been waged for the past half-year against the opposition to a “war of annihilation”. Why? Because Stalin has grown weaker. His bankruptcy in the Chinese and Anglo-Russian question is obvious, as are the heavy consequences of this bankruptcy for our international situation. The growing right wing is bringing pressure on Stalin: why get involved in the general strike or in China? Why excite Chamberlain, calling forth the danger of intervention? We will build socialism in one country. That is the *basic, fundamental, essential tendency of the present moment, which is “defeating” us now*. Precisely because Stalin has become immeasurably weaker under the blows of muddled criticism of the right and our half-stifled criticism from the left, he must change his war of attrition into a war of annihilation. The question is not one of details and not one of small modifications, but of the basic line of Bolshevism in basic questions. Whoever says “fuss” is proposing that we swim with the stream in conditions where the stream is flowing against Bolshevism.

No N. K., that we will not do. We will swim against the stream, even if you repeat aloud after Kosior the word “fuss”. And we never felt as deeply and unmistakably our ties with the entire tradition of Bolshevism as we do now, in these difficult days, when we and only we are preparing the morrow of the party and the Comintern.

From my soul I wish you good health.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The last sentence was inscribed in Trotsky's hand. In his draft he originally continued the sentence: “and equally unshakable confidence in the rightness of the line that you will defend.” Evidently he had second thoughts on this, because he crossed out the words following “health”. Was it that his confidence concerning Krupskaya's choice of lines was all too shakable?