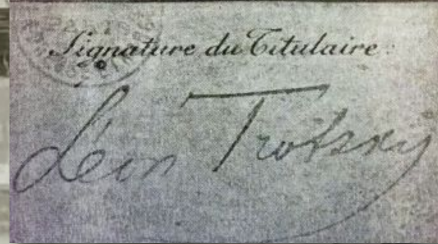
Trotsky in New York, 1917: Reluctant Jew in a Jewish City

By Kenneth D. Ackerman



Left: The Manhattan skyline in 1917.
Inset: Leon Trotsky's photo from his French passport in 1915.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Leon Trotsky never considered himself Jewish in any religious sense. He never wrote Yiddish, didn't keep kosher and never entered a synagogue. Neither of his two wives, and none of his four children were Jewish. He was raised on a farm, not in a shtetl (Yiddish for small town). He didn't hide his Jewishness. He spoke out eloquently against pogroms and anti-Jewish oppression, often at great personal risk. But when asked, he normally gave his religion as "socialist" or "internationalist."

Still, when he landed in New York City on Sunday morning, Jan. 14, 1917, both the New York Times and Tribune—two of six newspapers that covered his arrival—stressed Trotsky's identity as a "Jewish" writer editing "Jewish" journals in Russia and France. Over a million Jews lived in New York at that point, more than any other city on Earth. In New York, his Jewishness would stand out, like it or not.

Trotsky spent 10 weeks in New York in early 1917, just before returning home to Russia to help lead the Bolshevik Revolution, an event that would catapult him to global fame. The Bolshevik/Communist state he helped launch would last 73 years, and Trotsky would serve as its foreign affairs commissar and leader of its Red Army in a bloody three-year civil war, making him second in stature to Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. His shaggy black hair, sharp eyes, pointed beard and glasses would make him recognizable around the world.

But his time in power would be brief. Forced out in the mid-1920s, Trotsky would spend his last 12 years in exile before being murdered by an agent of dictator Joseph Stalin in Mexico. Today, 76 years after his death and 26 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, all his books remain in print and Trotskyist political candidates still compete in dozens of countries.

The New York Trotsky found in 1917 was a busy, freewheeling place unique in the world. World War I had engulfed Europe since 1914, a catastrophe that already had killed over 10 million soldiers and civilians. But America had stayed out, growing rich selling weapons to warring countries. Instead, New York was enjoying a golden age of music, theater, finance and politics, luxuries unthinkable in wartime Paris, London, Vienna or Berlin.

New York then was an international city in a way barely recognizable today. After six decades of record immigration, it had bulging neighborhoods with the aromas and sounds of foreign countries. Almost 2 million New Yorkers in 1917 came from across the ocean.

Jews made up the bulk of the Eastern Europeans, concentrated in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side. They still mostly spoke Yiddish, read their own newspapers, ate their own kosher food and practiced their own religion.

Forward with the Forward

The Yiddish-language newspaper, Forward, sold more than 200,000 copies each day in 1917, a circulation rivaling that of the New York Times. Second Avenue below Tenth Street belonged to the Yiddish theaters and popular Yiddish cafes.

Trotsky had come to New York as a refugee, expelled from five countries for his rabblerousing politics. In Russia, his home, czarist police had arrested him twice, each time exiling him to Siberia. Each time, Trotsky escaped. Since the outbreak of World War I, Austria, Germany, France and Spain had expelled him too.

But America was different. Still neutral, it had not yet imposed wartime crackdowns on dissent and had barely started tracking potential subversives or spies. Trotsky, to American eyes, looked like any other hardship case, just like thousands of others who filled the neighborhoods of lower Manhattan.

Trotsky did not live on the Lower East Side. He settled his family into a three-bedroom apartment in the Bronx at 1522 Vyse Avenue, near Crotona Park. By day, he helped edit a small Russian-language tabloid called Novy Mir from its basement office at 77 Saint Marks Place, in lower Manhattan. He rode the subway, enjoyed the movies (Charlie Chaplin and Molly Pickford were the rage) and sent his sons to public school in the Bronx.

But Trotsky too was, indeed, different. He jumped on the freedoms he found in New York to immerse himself in politics. Here, his extremism quickly separated him from most Jews in this new country, even those who shared his socialism.

The great issue dominating early 1917 was whether America should drop its neutrality and enter the World War. Just two weeks after Trotsky's arrival,

on January 31, 1917, Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare against neutral shipping, prompting President Woodrow Wilson to sever diplomatic relations. Most Americans now supported mobilization, but New York remained a hotbed of dissent, particularly among immigrant Jews.

Trotsky jumped right in, writing dozens of articles and giving over 30 speeches at venues including Cooper Union and Beethoven Hall. For socialists like him, the issue was easy. Why, they argued, should workers in France, Germany or anyplace else fight each other when their common enemy was the capitalists? Loyalty to country meant nothing to an "internationalist" like Trotsky.

Most Russian Jews had come fleeing oppression: pogroms, murders, harassment, bans against attending universities, owning land or even living in most cities. Now, with Russia (which still included Poland and Ukraine) allied with Britain and France, they saw American entry into the War as helping the czar.

But most Jews had a different reason to oppose the War: They had grown to admire their new home. Life here was harsh, but they appreciated the country as a place with real freedoms and opportunities where immigrants could enjoy respect and build a future. This split over patriotism would reach a breaking point on March 1, 1917, with an event decisive in America's decision finally to enter the war: the disclosure of the Zimmermann Telegram.

Courtesy of The Outlook, 1917

Trotsky's newspaper office at 77 Saint Marks Place in New York City.

The Zimmermann Telegram was a cable from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann offering Mexico a reward if it joined the fight on Germany's side: the return of Texas, California and other lands seized by the United States after the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War. The idea posed a direct threat to the American heartland and sparked outrage across the country.

At the Forward, still staunchly socialist, the managing editor that day was B. Charney Vladeck, a Russian who had served two prison terms under the czar before fleeing to America in 1908. Unlike Trotsky, Vladeck had become enamored of his new country. He described how, visiting Philadelphia, he "prayed silently and without a hat in front of Independence Hall." In America, he wrote, "for the first time I felt free to explore the world as I want to see it … I don't love it only as an artist for its colors, but as a citizen feeling that it is mine."

When Vladeck saw the Zimmermann Telegram cross his desk, he was appalled. He took pen to paper and wrote a headline in Yiddish: "Can this be so that Germany is actually performing such an idiotic diplomatic schtick?" He continued: "Every inhabitant of the country would fight to the last drop of blood to protect the great American republic against the monarchies of Europe and Asia and their allies."

Trotsky, seeing Vladeck's article, erupted. Here was the Forward, the most widely read socialist daily voice in America, suddenly endorsing war, even encouraging young men to enlist. Trotsky decided to demand an explanation from the man who held ultimate control over the Forward, its founder and chief editor, Abraham Cahan.

He stormed out of his office on Saint Marks Place, traversed the crowded lower East Side to the Forward building on East Broadway, found Cahan's office, and barged in. By all accounts, the exchange quickly degenerated, voices shrill, faces red and tempers lost. Abraham Cahan, 20 years older than Trotsky, took considerable pride, not just as editor of the Forward but as a founder of American socialism and an accomplished member of the literati in his own right, author of the acclaimed English-language novel

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

The Forward's founder and chief editor, Abraham Cahan.

"The Rise of David Levinsky." And who was this Leon Trotsky, a newcomer editor of a puny Russian tabloid, to tell him, Abraham Cahan, how to run his newspaper? To question his managing editor? To question his socialism?

Trotsky asked Cahan about the Vladeck story, and Cahan told him that, yes, he had seen it, he had approved it and it was now the official policy of the Forward. At that, Trotsky told Cahan that he would never again write for the Forward and demanded that Cahan return a draft article he had submitted a few days earlier.

The confrontation lasted just long enough to burn bridges. Trotsky marched back to his desk at Novy Mir and, over the next three weeks, wrote five articles for Novy Mir blasting Abraham Cahan and his newspaper. He accused Cahan of being an autocrat, out of touch, encamped in his 10-story building, and insisted he be expelled from the party.

But for Cahan too, the exchange marked a turning point. Cahan would be one of the first major American socialists to denounce the Bolsheviks after they seized power in Russia. When Moscow sympathizers tried to pressure him to soften his criticisms, he declared, "I would rather see the Forward go under than weaken the struggle against the communists."

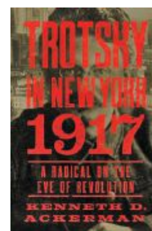
Bronx Man Makes His Mark

Amid all this turmoil, it came as a shock when news reached New York on Thursday, March 15, that food riots in Petrograd, Russia, had escalated into full-scale rebellion, forcing the hated czar, Nicholas II, to abdicate. Ceremonies erupted worldwide, none more intense than on the Jewish Lower East Side. Trotsky had not seen his homeland for over a decade; it was time to return. In dozens of speeches all over the city, he made his intentions clear: to reach Petrograd, join the resistance, help topple the provisional government, take Russia out of the War and create socialism.

That November, when news reached New York of the Bolshevik revolution with Trotsky's name in the headlines, locals all agreed on one thing: "TROTSKY, NOW IN KERENSKY'S PLACE, ONCE LIVED HERE," headlined the New York World. "TROTSKY IN EXILE LIVED IN THE BRONX," echoed the New York Times. Most direct was the Bronx Home News, which announced simply: "BRONX MAN LEADS RUSSIAN REVOLUTION." The implication: Only a New Yorker could have pulled off this job.

Trotsky returned the compliment. For 10 weeks in 1917, the city offered him and his family freedom, comfort, security, friends and celebrity, a taste of what they later would call "the American dream." Trotsky carried American ideas back to Russia for his new Soviet state: the movies, science and culture.

"To have Bolshevism shod in the American way" with technology, math, efficient factories, stated Trotsky. "There is our task!" Writing in later years that, in the future, "all the problems of our planet will be decided upon American soil."



This article was adapted by the author from his book, "Trotsky in New York 1917," published last year by Counterpoint Press.