

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

02 – Trotsky in New York – Ackerman

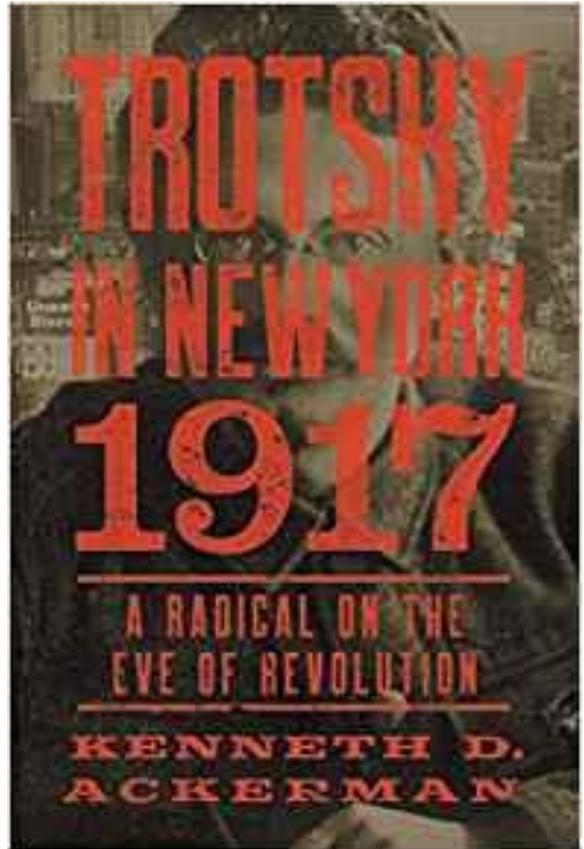
Title: TROTSKY IN NEW YORK, 1917: A RADICAL ON THE EVE OF REVOLUTION

Author: Kenneth D. Ackerman

Publication info: 2016, Counterpoint
(www.counterpointpress.com)
(available on Amazon, click on cover image for link)

Keywords: Trotsky, New York, Russian revolution, 1917, Lenin, communism

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 29 December 2017



Reason to read: Revealing on a new aspect of the Russian revolution: how did the main characters (in this case Trotsky and Bukharin, with some mention of Lenin) comport themselves in bourgeois society, and why the socialists of America rejected the violence, illegality and total social aggression of the Russian revolutionaries.

Talking points:

1. Most important: in this account, Trotsky was the prime mover of the November coup d'état, not Lenin, who slunk in from the suburbs on the night in question, heavily disguised, and took over once Trotsky and the men under his command had secured the main places in the city.
2. Secondly: Trotsky and the other Russian revolutionaries ran into a brick wall of opposition to “illegal” methods of advancing socialism in the US. There, constitutional government and the reality of some approximation to the rule of law made violence and blank aggression unacceptable to normal people. This echoes the same disappointment that the Soviet leadership when the German workers in 1919 preferred their own government to an “international” (i.e. Soviet) one and “Socialism in one country” became inevitable if anything were to survive of the Revolution.
3. Britain was pretty on the case with these guys, and the detention of Trotsky in Nova Scotia on his way back to Russia showed him just how firm they were prepared to be, while at the same

time trying to observe the international norms. Trotsky was released after Miliukov, the first Foreign Minister in the Provisional Government, said he should be, and the British complied.

4. According to Ackerman, Lenin was almost incidental to the Bolshevik coup on 7 November 1917, beyond setting the general tone of intransigence (which Trotsky actively supported). This is an interesting argument, to which Ackerman does not give enough attention, but which is certainly justified by the facts he does give.

Incidental interest: Morris Hillquit, the leader of the socialists in New York, was the man who opposed Trotsky's desire to resort to violence in order to promote revolution in America. He is quoted as agreeing with a friend's remark that "a necktie can be tastefully tied and lying as it should without breaking the principles of proletariat socialism. God forbid!" (p. 65)

Style: Literate, and with an interesting level of circumstantial detail. However, on too many occasions the author imagines what he does not know. (He does say this, but still...)

Surprising points: Tolstoy's two sons were taken aback, on arriving in Petrograd from New York, to find that everyone around them spoke the same language.

Link(s): You can see Kenneth Ackerman talking very interestingly about this book, in conversation with a rather unusual American literary interviewer, at this link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KzL_HoxM7k&t=1514s

Negative issues: There really is not a full book in this short episode of about two months, which were in any case mostly undocumented. Less about New York beyond what is known, and more about the Petrograd period, which takes up the last 50 pages, would have been more interesting.

Overall recommendation level: Fairly high – if you like your history highly pixelated.