

# Men Without a Country: Snowden and Trotsky

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I have been following the story of Edward J. Snowden, so far the most famous man of the twenty-first century without a country, who at the moment bides his time in an international way station in Moscow waiting for some country to offer him a visa and asylum. A whistle blower who revealed that the U.S. government was conducting massive surveillance of both Americans and foreigners, the government indicted him under the Espionage Act of 1917, a relic of World War I and Woodrow Wilson's suppression of the American Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. As Snowden himself explained, he has been stripped of his passport and his citizenship without having been convicted of any crime. Thinking both of Snowden's situation and his alleged crime, I couldn't help think of another such case, the most famous man without a country of the twentieth century. While the comparison between Snowden and Leon Trotsky is in many ways unlikely or even preposterous, I think there are more parallels than one would expect.

In 1936 Trotsky found himself in a situation very similar to Snowden's. Trotsky, of course, was one of the two principal leaders of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. After the other, Vladimir Lenin, died in 1924, their comrade Joseph Stalin had carried out a kind of creeping coup in the Soviet Union that would eventually centralize the party in his hands, destroy the workers councils (*soviets* in Russian) and kill at the hands of his new bureaucratic state virtually all of the "Old Bolsheviks," the men and women of Lenin's party who had been instrumental in the revolution. Trotsky was Stalin's principal adversary in the Communist Party, and so at the beginning of that creeping, counter-revolutionary coup, Stalin had organized the expulsion of Trotsky from the Communist Party and then from the Soviet Union, sending him into exile in Turkey in 1929. Expelled from Turkey, the government of France offered Trotsky asylum in 1933, though he was forbidden to visit Paris. When France decided it no longer wanted him, he found refuge in Norway in 1935, but there he was placed under house arrest. In 1936 Norway, anxious to sign a commercial treaty with Stalin's Soviet Union, informed Trotsky he would have to leave.

Where could he go? These were of course the years when Mussolini and the Fascists held sway in Italy, Hitler and the Nazis were in power in Germany, Franco was launching his Falangist coup in Spain. In all of those regimes and others in Europe Socialists and Communists were anathema. The Anglo-American democracies, as they were called, Britain and the United States, had no desire to domicile the Russian revolutionary. The Communist Parties of the world, loyal and obedient to the Stalin and the Communist International, railed against Trotsky whom they slandered as a traitor and a fascist. Communist influence, working through their liberal allies, kept the pressure on European governments to deny Trotsky asylum. Fascists, Nazis and Communists, Conservative and Liberals all agreed they did not want him. No European country would offer him a visa. And, if Trotsky failed to get a visa and were returned to the Soviet Union where the famous "show trials" were taking place, he would surely have been put on trial, condemned, and executed. The situation looked hopeless. As the French surrealist poet André Breton put it, "The world is a planet without a visa for Trotsky."

To the surprise of the European world, the virtually unknown president of Mexico, the left-leaning nationalist Lázaro Cárdenas, despite the protests of the Communist Party, offered asylum to Trotsky. Cárdenas was a man of remarkable personal courage and great integrity. He explained to his Foreign Minister Eduardo Hay that he had done so not because of any political affinity with Trotsky, but because "established international norms" and "the evolution of Rights in the sense of justice" made it clear that Mexico had a duty to offer asylum to any person, regardless of their origin, who

was exiled for political reasons. (Olivia Gall, *Trotsky en México y la vida política en el period de Cárdenas, 1937-1940* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1991), p. 25.) The same commitment to this sense of Right and justice would lead Cárdenas to offer asylum as well to 40,000 Spanish refugees from the Civil War after the victory of Franco and defeat of the left in 1939.

One wonders, why has no Cárdenas come forward to rescue Snowden? Is there today no government as far left as Mexico in the 1930s or no leader with the principles and integrity of Cárdenas?