

Russian Revolution's 'rock'n'roll star' Trotsky gets centenary TV series

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High-budget drama of once taboo leader to be shown on state TV, but Bolshevik uprising still a delicate subject in Russia

Leon Trotsky, in a floor-length black leather jacket, paces back and forth in a carriage of his armoured train, pistol in hand. A heavily made-up woman smoking a cigarette is reading poetry, then suddenly disrobes, and the Bolshevik revolutionary grasps her in an embrace. Images of writhing flesh and the sound of crashing music accompany footage of the train hurtling across the snowy Russian landscape, spreading the spirit of revolution to the masses.

This is how viewers will first see Trotsky, one of the most controversial figures of the Russian Revolution, in a new high-budget series that will premiere on Russian state television on Monday, the day before the [centenary of the 1917 Bolshevik uprising](#).

The October Revolution - which actually happened on 7 November, but pre-Soviet Russia used of a different calendar - changed the world forever, but remains a delicate subject in [Russia](#), where some believe it was a tragedy and others are still nostalgic for the Soviet Union.

Despite uncertainty about how to mark the anniversary, the powerful director of Russia's Channel One said Trotsky was the perfect figure to bring the revolution back to life in the living rooms of today's Russians.

"Trotsky is a real rock'n'roll star, and for the whole of his life, not just during the October Revolution," said Konstantin Ernst, who was a producer on the show.

"When you look at the specially designed glasses and leather jackets and the armoured train, it's almost a cyberpunk story. We thought 'he is a character that can be understandable for the younger audience'."



Konstantin Khabensky as Leon Trotsky. Photograph: Supplied

Trotsky was born Lev Bronstein in 1879 and became one of the leading figures in the Bolshevik party, together with [Vladimir Lenin](#). Ernst called him “the executive producer of the revolution”. After Lenin’s death in 1924, however, Trotsky fell out of favour and was eventually exiled from Russia in 1929 as Joseph Stalin cemented his grip on power. His name later became a byword for conspiracy and opposition to Stalin, and he was murdered by an assassin sent by Stalin’s security services in Mexico City in 1940.

An advance screening of the first episode skipped back and forth through the timeline of Trotsky’s life, featuring scenes from his early life, the immediate aftermath of the revolution and his exile in Mexico. One scene recalls his abuse at the hands of the Odessa prison chief Nikolai Trotsky in 1898. The young Bronstein would later go on to adopt the name of his guard. The first episode features a brief appearance by Lenin, and later episodes will also feature Stalin. Trotsky is played by Konstantin Khabensky, a leading Russian actor.

The danger and undesirability of revolutions is a key message of today’s Kremlin and state television, and by focusing on Trotsky rather than Lenin the series can show the tragic bloodletting the October Revolution engendered, but avoid direct criticism of Lenin, whom many Russians still admire.

Ernst said he had initially wanted to do a Lenin biopic for the anniversary, but the Soviet leader’s existence, so taken up with philosophical arguments and written polemics with other Marxist thinkers, would make a dry subject for a high-budget drama.

The channel has still made a 16-part dramatised documentary about Lenin but, to avoid controversy it has decided not to show the film on the actual anniversary of the revolution. Instead it will be shown in coming months, and in a late-evening slot when there is “a more educated audience”, Ernst said.

There has been almost no public discussion or artistic representation of Trotsky in Russia. His name was taboo during the Soviet period and modern Russia has not revisited his legacy until now.

In the first episode of the new series, the revolutionary comes across as fiery, sensual and utterly ruthless, at one point ordering the execution of one in every 10 men in a regiment that deserted during a civil war battle.



The filming of a scene from the drama. Photograph: Supplied

“When we were working on the script I read so much unpleasant information about Trotsky that I wanted to take a shower afterwards,” said Alexander Tsekalo, the show’s co-producer. “The descendants of Trotsky today are terrorists, extremists and anti-globalists.”

Ernst said Trotsky was a complicated figure and that viewers should draw their own conclusions. “I think he combines everything – good and evil, injustice and bravery. He’s the archetypal 20th-century revolutionary. But people shouldn’t think that if Trotsky had won and not Stalin, things would have been better, because they wouldn’t have been.”

The Russian historian Boris Kolonitsky said the negative portrayal could have the opposite effect to that intended by the film-makers among certain segments of young viewers: “The image of a tough, sexually aggressive revolutionary could be very attractive to young people. There’s only a short distance from demonisation to sacralisation.”