

Leon Trotsky

On Optimism and Pessimism

On the 20th Century and on Many Other Issues

(1901)

Dum spiro spero! [While there is life, there's hope!] ... If I were one of the celestial bodies, I would look with complete detachment upon this miserable ball of dust and dirt ... I would shine upon the good and the evil alike ... But I am a man. World history which to you, dispassionate gobbler of science, to you, book-keeper of eternity, seems only a negligible moment in the balance of time, is to me everything! As long as I breathe, I shall fight for the future, that radiant future in which man, strong and beautiful, will become master of the drifting stream of his history and will direct it towards the boundless horizon of beauty, joy, and happiness! ...

The nineteenth century has in many ways satisfied and has in even more ways deceived the hopes of the optimist ... It has compelled him to transfer most of his hopes to twentieth century. Whenever the optimist was confronted by an atrocious fact, he exclaimed: What, and this can happen on the threshold of the twentieth century! When he drew wonderful pictured of the harmonious future, he placed them in the twentieth century.

And now that century has come! What has it brought with it from the outset?

In France – the poisonous foam of racial hatred [\[1\]](#); in Austria – nationalist strife ...; in South Africa – the agony of a tiny people, which is being murdered by a colossus [\[2\]](#); on the 'free' island itself – triumphant hymns to the victorious greed of jingoist jobbers; dramatic 'complications' in the east; rebellions of starving popular masses in Italy, Bulgaria, Romania ... Hatred and murder, famine and blood ...

It seems as if the new century, this gigantic newcomer, were bent at the very moment of its appearance to drive the optimist into absolute pessimism and civic nirvana.

– Death to Utopia! Death to faith! Death to love! Death to hope! thunders the twentieth century in salvos of fire and in the rumbling of guns.

– Surrender, you pathetic dreamer. Here I am, your long awaited twentieth century, your ‘future.’

– No, replies the unhumbled optimist: You, you are only the present.

Notes

1. The [Dreyfus Affair](#).

2. The Boer War