Seeker After Truth

By ROBERT V. ANDERSON

WE HERE celebrate the centenary of Henry George’s masterpiece, Progress and Poverty. But the United States Postal Service has reminded us, by means of a commemorative stamp, that 1979 also marks the centenary of the birth of one of George’s strong admirers - Albert Einstein, whose very name has come to be a virtual synonym for intellect. Understandably, the Postal Service has made no effort to commemorate the fact that, in addition, two other history-making individuals were born one hundred years ago: Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili and Lev Davidovich Bronstein, better known as Josef Stalin and Leon Trotsky. (Its failure to commemorate the centenary of Progress and Poverty is less understandable.)

In Stalin we see an odious mixture of low animal cunning and brute force. Although books appeared of which he was ostensibly the author, there is no reason to suspect that he ever had the slightest interest in abstract ideas, or, indeed, in any ideas not directly pursuant to his own acquisition and retention of absolute political power. Around himself he sedulously encouraged the development of a “cult of personality,” the hollowness of which became apparent shortly after his death, when his remnants were moved unceremoniously from their place of honor next to those of Lenin to an inconspicuous spot outside the Kremlin wall.

The case of Trotsky is more interesting, yet no less repulsive. For Trotsky was a gifted intellectual - an able critic, a brilliant orator and writer, and a man of genuine philosophical and scientific inclinations, which he betrayed. This is what makes his case at once so pathetic and so reprehensible. In a review of the latest biography of Trotsky, Ralph Raico says of him: “He was a champion of thought-control, prison camps, and the firing squad for his opponents, and of forced labor for ordinary, non-brilliant working people. To the last, he never permitted himself to glimpse the possibility that the bloody, bureaucratic tyranny over which Stalin presided might never have come into existence but for his own efforts.” In 1940, the head that plotted terror, justified forced labor, and dreamed of collective biological experiments was bashed in by an ice ax wielded by an agent of the monstrous system he had helped create.

What a contrast to these two was Henry George:

“And you will see the remedies. Not in wild dreams of red destruction nor weak projects for putting men in leading-strings to a brainless abstraction called the state, but in simple measures sanctioned by justice. You will see in light the great remedy, in freedom the great solvent.”

“In light the great remedy, in freedom the great solvent.” These words, spoken more than two years before Progress and Poverty was first set in type, encapsulate the spirit of its author, the spirit of one who would wish today, not to be enshrined as the object of a cult, but to be remembered as a seeker after truth.