Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification

A review of two Trotsky biographies by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher

Part 1: Seventy years since Stalin’s year of terror

By David North
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Today we publish the first part of a four-part review of two biographies of Trotsky written by Professors Geoffrey Swain and Ian D. Thatcher. The second, third and final parts can be accessed here. Click here to download the entire review in PDF.


This year marks the 70th anniversary of the most terrible year in the history of the Soviet Union. Having staged in August 1936 a political show trial in Moscow that provided a pseudo-judicial cover for the murder of Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, Ivan Smirnov and other leaders of the October Revolution, Stalin launched in 1937 a campaign of terror whose goal was the destruction of all remnants of Marxist political thought and culture in the Soviet Union. The terror targeted for extermination virtually everyone who had played a significant role in the October Revolution of 1917, or who had at any point in their careers been identified with any form of Marxist and socialist opposition to the Stalinist regime, or were associated — either personally or through their comrades, friends and family — with a Marxist political, intellectual and cultural milieu.

Even after the passage of 70 years, the number of those murdered by the Stalinist regime in 1937-38 has not been conclusively established. According to a recent analysis by Professor Michael Ellman of the University of Amsterdam, the “best estimate that can currently be made of the number of repression deaths in 1937-38 is the range of 950,000-1.2 million, i.e. about a million. This is the estimate which should be used by historians, teachers and journalists concerned with twentieth century Russian — and world — history.”[1] Ellman notes that the discovery of new evidence may at some point require a revision of this figure.

There now exists substantial archival evidence that provides a detailed picture of how Stalin and his henchmen in the Politburo and NKVD organized and carried out their campaign of mass murder. The Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court played a central role in the process of judicially-sanctioned mass murder. A total of 54 defendants were sentenced at the three public show trials in Moscow. But there were tens of thousands of people who were tried behind closed doors by the Military Collegium and sentenced to death after “trials” that usually were completed within ten to fifteen minutes.[2] The victims were drawn from lists of individuals that had been prepared by the NKVD, along with a proposed sentence. These were submitted for review by Stalin and the Politburo. The names were those of “leading Party, Soviet, Komsomol, Trade Union, Red Army and NKVD officials, as well as writers, artists and prominent representatives of economic institutions, who had been arrested by 3] the Stalin sanctioned his NKVD and other lists and, in almost all cases, approved the recommended sentences — mostly death by shooting. There are 383 lists in the Presidential Archive in Moscow, submitted to Stalin between 27 February 1937 and 29 September 1938, which contain the typed names of 44,500 people. The signatures of Stalin and his colleagues, along with their penciled-in comments, are on these lists.[4]

The Military Collegium handed down 14,732 sentences in 1937 and another 24,435 in 1938. Stalin was the principal director of the terror and was deeply involved in its daily operations. On just one day, 12 September 1938, Stalin approved 3,167 death sentences for action by the Military Collegium.[5] There exists a substantial amount of information on how the Military Collegium conducted its work. Its secret trials were usually conducted at Moscow’s Lefortovo prison. The official main in charge of the process was the Collegium’s President, Vasily Ul’rkh. On a busy day, the Collegium could handle 30 or more cases. It was often necessary to set up additional Collegium courts to deal with the crush of prisoners. The usual procedure was to bring prisoners before the Collegium. The charge was read to the accused, who was generally asked only to acknowledge the testimony that he had given during his earlier “investigation.” Whether the defendant answered in the affirmative or negative, the trial was then declared to be over. After hearing five such cases, the Collegium retired to consider its verdicts, which had already been decided and written down. The defendants were then recalled to hear their fate — almost always death. The sentences were generally carried out the same day.[6]

This was hard work for the Collegium members, and they required substantial nourishment to keep them going. They retired to the deliberation room for their meals, which, according to the account of a Lefortovo prison official, consisted of “various cold snacks, including different kinds of sausages, cheese, butter, black caviar, pastries, chocolate, fruits and fruit juice.” Ul’rkh washed the food down with brandy.[7]

The Collegium members did not only hand down verdicts. Frequently they attended and even carried out the executions that they had ordered. Ul’rkh occasionally returned home from his work with the blood of his victims on his greatcoat.

Moscow was not the only city in which the secret trials were held. Parallel processes were conducted in cities throughout the USSR. The terror did not subside until the Stalinist regime had murdered virtually all the representatives of the Marxist and socialist culture that had laid the intellectual foundations for the October Revolution and the formation of...
the Soviet Union. Soviet society was traumatized by the massive killing. As the Russian Marxist historian Vadim Z. Rogovin wrote:

“A wasteland of scorched earth was formed around the murdered leaders of Bolshevism, insofar as their wives, children and closest comrades were eliminated after them. The fear evoked by the Stalinist terror left its mark on the consciousness and behavior of several generations of Soviet people; for many it eradicated the readiness, desire and ability to engage in honest ideological thought. At the same time, the executioners and informers from Stalin’s time continued to thrive; they had secured their own well-being and the prosperity of their children through active participation in frame-ups, expulsion, torture, and so forth.”[8]

Stalin’s crimes were justified on the basis of grotesque lies, which portrayed the Marxist opponents and victims of the bureaucratic-totalitarian regime — above all, Leon Trotsky — as saboteurs, terrorists and agents of various imperialist and fascist powers. But the lies that formed the basis of the show trial indictments of Trotsky and other Old Bolsheviks had been prepared over the previous 15 years, that is, dating back to the anti-Trotsky campaign initiated in 1922 by Stalin and his self-destructive allies, Kamenev and Zinoviev.

As Trotsky explained in the aftermath of the first two Moscow Trials — the proceeding of August 1936 was followed by the second show trial in January 1937 — the origins of the judicial frame-up were to be found in the falsification of the historical record that had been required by the political struggle against “Trotskyism” — that is, against the political opposition to the bureaucratic regime headed by Stalin. “It remains an incontestable historical fact,” Trotsky wrote in March 1937, “that the preparation of the bloody judicial frame-ups had its inception in the ‘minor’ historical distortions and ‘innocent’ falsification of citations.”[9]

No one who has studied the origins of the Stalinist terror and grappled seriously with its consequences is inclined to underestimate the politically reactionary and socially destructive implications of historical falsification. We know from the example of the Soviet Union that the political process that first manifested itself as the falsification of the history of the Russian revolution eventually metastasized into the mass extermination of Russian revolutionaries. Before Stalin entered into history as one of its worst murderers, he had already burnished his reputation as its greatest liar.

Trotsky not only exposed the lies of Stalin; he also explained the objective roots and function of the regime’s vast system of political and social duplicity:

“Thousands of writers, historians and economists in the USSR write by command what they do not believe. Professors in universities and school teachers are compelled to change written textbooks in a hurry in order to accommodate themselves to the successive stage of the official lie. The spirit of the Inquisition thoroughly impregnating the atmosphere of the country feeds ... from profound social sources. To justify their privileges the ruling caste perverts the theory which has as its aim the elimination of all privileges. The lie serves, therefore, as the fundamental ideological cement of the bureaucracy. The more irreconcilable becomes the contradiction between the bureaucracy and the people, all the ruder becomes the lie, all the more brazenly is it converted into criminal falsification and judicial frame-up. Whoever has not understood this inner dialectic of the Stalinist régime will likewise fail to understand the Moscow trials.”[10]

It may appear, in retrospect, astonishing that so many people who considered themselves on the left were prepared to justify, and even actually believe, the accusations hurled by Vyshinsky, the Stalinist prosecutor, against the Old Bolshevik defendants at the Moscow Trials. A substantial section of liberal and leftist public opinion accepted the legitimacy of the Moscow Trials and, in this way, lent its support to the terror that was raging in the USSR. The Stalinist regime — whatever its crimes within the USSR — was seen, at least until the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler in August 1939, as a political ally against Nazi Germany. Pragmatic considerations, rooted in the social outlook of the petty-bourgeois “friends of the USSR,” underlay the pro-Stalin apologetics of large sections of “left” public opinion. Even the refutation of key elements of the indictments was ignored by Stalin’s apologists.[11]

The work of the Dewey Commission, which took its name from the American liberal philosopher who served as chairman of the 1937 Inquiry into the Soviet charges against Leon Trotsky, stood in noble opposition to the cynical, dishonest and reactionary attitudes that prevailed in the circles of left public opinion, especially in Britain, France and the United States.

**The exposure of Stalinism**

Nearly two decades were to pass before the edifice of Stalinist lies erected at the Moscow trials began to crumble. The decisive event in this process was the “secret” speech given by Khrushchev in February 1956, before the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which the criminal character of Stalin’s terror was acknowledged for the first time. But this exposure was preceded by significant developments in the field of historical research that contributed immeasurably to a factually accurate and more profound understanding of the history of the Soviet Union and to the role of Leon Trotsky.

The first major event in the historical rehabilitation of Trotsky was the publication of E. H. Carr’s monumental history of Soviet Russia, and especially its fourth volume, entitled *The Interregnum*. This volume, making extensive use of official Soviet documents available in the West, provided a detailed account of the political struggles that erupted inside the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party in 1923-24. Carr was not politically sympathetic to Trotsky. But he brilliantly summarized and analyzed the complex issues of program, policy and principle with which Trotsky grappled in a difficult and critical period of Soviet history. Carr’s account made clear that Trotsky became the target of an unprincipled attack that was, in its initial stages, motivated by his rivals’ subjective considerations of personal power. While Carr found much to criticize in Trotsky’s response to the provocations of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, the historian left no doubt that he viewed Trotsky as, alongside of Lenin, the towering figure of the Bolshevist Revolution. In “many spheres” of revolutionary political activity, Carr maintained in a later volume, Trotsky “outshone” even Lenin. As for Stalin, Carr wrote that Trotsky “eclipsed” him “in almost all.” But the decline in revolutionary fervor inside the USSR, ever more noticeable after 1922, affected Trotsky’s political fortunes. “Trotsky was a hero of the revolution,” wrote Carr. “He fell when the heroic age was over.”[12]

The second major event in the study of Soviet history was the publication of Isaac Deutscher’s magisterial biographical trilogy: *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast*. April 2007 marked the centenary of Deutscher’s birth; and it is appropriate to pay tribute to his achievement as a historian and biographer. Even though I speak as one who disagrees profoundly with many of Deutscher’s political judgments — particularly as they relate to Trotsky’s decision to found the Fourth International (which Deutscher opposed) — it is difficult to overstate the impact of Deutscher’s *Prophet*. He was not being immodest when he compared his own work to that of Thomas Carlyle who, as the biographer of another revolutionary, Oliver Cromwell, “had to drag out the Lord Protector from under a mountain of dead dogs, a huge load of calumny and oblivion.”[13] Deutscher proudly cited a British critic, who wrote that the first volume of the trilogy, *The Prophet Armed*, “undoes three decades of Stalinist denigration.”[14]

In addition to the work of Carr and Deutscher, a new generation of historians made, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, significant contributions to our understanding of the Russian revolution, the origins and development of the Soviet Union, and its leading personalities. Leopold Haimson, Samuel Baron, Robert Daniels, Alexander Rabinowitch, Robert Tucker, Moshe Lewin, Marcel Liebman, Richard Day and Baruch
Knei-Paz come immediately to mind. To recognize the value of their work and to appreciate their scholarship does not, and need not, imply agreement with their judgments and conclusions. The enduring significance of their collective efforts, and those of others whom I have not named, is that they contributed to the refutation of the lies, distortions and half-truths in which the history of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union had been enshrouded for so many decades. And not only falsifications of the Soviet government, but also the substituting anti-Marxist propaganda of the US government in the era of the Cold War.

To have some sense of the impact of these historians’ work on the intellectual climate of their times, permit me to cite several passages from the text of a study of Trotsky’s life that was published in 1973 as part of the well-known “Great Lives Observed” series. This series — published by Prentice-Hall, the long-established distributor of academic textbooks — was a mainstay of university history courses in the 1960s and 1970s. Thousands of students taking courses in Russian or modern European history would have been introduced to the figure of Leon Trotsky through this volume, and this is what they would have read in its very first paragraph:

“With the passage of time historical figures either shrink or grow in stature. In the case of Leon Trotsky, time, after a brief eclipse, has increased his image so that he appears today, for good or evil, as one of the giants of the first half of the twentieth century. The renewed interest in Trotsky’s life is reflected by the numerous studies which are beginning to appear, and by the sudden availability of almost all his writings. For many of the New Left generation he has reclaimed both the prestige and the mantle of the revolutionary leader.”[15]

The introduction provided, on the basis of the findings of contemporary scholars, a concise assessment of Trotsky’s revolutionary career. “The argument supporting Trotsky’s claim to importance,” it stated, “rests on his contribution to political theory, his literary legacy, and above all his role as a man of action.” As a theorist, Trotsky’s analysis of Russian social forces and his elaboration of the theory of permanent revolution “suggests that as a Marxist thinker he could, on the power of his creativity, go beyond the formulations of Marx and Engels.” Trotsky, therefore, deserved to be placed within the “brilliant coterie of Marxist theorists such as Plekhanov, Kautsky, Luxemburg, and, for that matter, Lenin himself.” As a literary figure, Trotsky stood above even these great Marxists. “Magnificent word play, scathing sarcasm, and brilliant character sketches are the hallmarks of his writing. To read Trotsky is to observe the literary artist at work.” And then there were Trotsky’s achievements as a man of action. The introduction noted “Trotsky’s role in Russian revolutionary history is second only to Lenin’s.” and his “decisive leadership in the Military Revolutionary Committee that paved the way for the October insurrection...” It also called attention to Trotsky’s “determined efforts to build the Red Army in the face of enormous obstacles...”[16]

None of these achievements was known to the mass of Soviet citizens. There existed no honest account of Trotsky’s life and work within the USSR because “Soviet historians have long since abandoned the responsibility of historical writing and have busied themselves with the grotesque efforts to create a new demonology.” Within the Soviet Union, Trotsky remained “an abstraction of evil — a militating force against the future of the Soviet people.”[17] But outside the USSR, the situation was different:

“Soviet demonology, absurd from its inception, has been largely vanquished, at least in the Western world. Part Three of this book contains selections of relatively recent writers on the problem of Trotsky. The best examples of this more objective scholarship are Edward Hallett Carr’s multi-volume study, The Bolshevik Revolution, and Isaac Deutscher’s painstaking three-volume study of Trotsky. The historical debate may be never ending, but in the light of these more recent studies Trotsky’s role in the Russian experience can be seen in a new and positive perspective. In the West, the miasmic cloud has disappeared; the demonic hierarchy has been exorcized. We can now come to grips with the material forces and issues which motivated and inspired the action and deeds of Leon Trotsky.”[18]

I have quoted extensively from this text because it provides a clear summary of what the general student studying history at the college level would have been told about Leon Trotsky some 35 years ago.[19] When one turns to the texts that are now being presented to students, it becomes immediately apparent that we are living in a very different — and far less healthy — intellectual environment. But before I may do so, it is necessary to examine, if only briefly, the treatment of Trotsky in Soviet historical literature in the aftermath of the 20th Congress and Khrushchev’s “secret speech.”

**Soviet history after the 20th Congress**

The official exposure of Stalin’s crimes in 1956 placed the Kremlin bureaucracy and its many apologists on the defensive. The party-line version of history had been for nearly two decades Stalin’s own *Short Course of the History of the CPSU*. From the moment Khrushchev ascended the podium of the Twentieth Party Congress, this compendium of incredible lies, soaked in human blood, lost all credibility. But with what could it be replaced? To this question the Stalinist bureaucracy never found a viable answer.

Every important question relating to the history of the Russian revolutionary movement — the events of 1917, the Civil War, the early years of the Soviet state, the inner-party conflicts of the 1920s, the growth of the Soviet bureaucracy, the relation of the Soviet Union to international revolutionary movements and struggles, industrialization, collectivization, Soviet cultural policy, and the Stalinist terror — posed unavoidably the issue of Lev Davidovich Trotsky. Every criticism of Stalin raised the question, “Was Trotsky right?” The historical, political, theoretical and moral issues that flowed from the exposure of Stalin’s crimes and the catastrophic impact of his policies and personality on every aspect of Soviet society could not be dealt with by simply removing Stalin from his glass-encased mausoleum alongside Lenin and reburying his corpse under the wall of the Kremlin.

Isaac Deutscher had nourished the hope — a hope that reflected the limitations of his political outlook — that the Stalinist bureaucracy would finally, at last, find some way to come to terms with history and make its peace with Leon Trotsky. It proved a vain hope. To deal honestly with Trotsky would have required, at some point, that his writings be made available. But notwithstanding the passage of decades, Trotsky’s exposure and denunciations of the Stalinist regime remained as explosive in their revolutionary potential as they had been during his own lifetime.

After Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and unveiled his policy of glasnost, there was a great deal of public discussion about the official rehabilitation of Trotsky. As the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution approached, it was widely anticipated that Gorbachev would take this opportunity to acknowledge Trotsky’s role in the leadership of the October Revolution and his struggle against Stalin. But the very opposite occurred. On November 2, 1987, speaking in a televised address to a national audience, Gorbachev again denounced Trotsky in traditional Stalinist terms. Trotsky, he said, was “an excessively self-assured politician who always vacillated and cheated.”[20]

By the time Gorbachev delivered his shameful speech, interest in Trotsky and the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism was developing rapidly in the Soviet Union. Soviet journals that published, for the first time since the 1920s, documents relating to Trotsky, such as *Argumenti i Fakti*, enjoyed a massive increase in their circulation. Trotskyists from Europe, Australia and the United States traveled to the Soviet Union and delivered lectures that were widely attended.
Gorbachev’s speech was clearly an attempt to respond to this changed situation, but it proved utterly unsuccessful. The old Stalinist lies — denying Trotsky’s role in the October Revolution, portraying him as an enemy of the Soviet Union — had lost all credibility.

Within little more than four years after Gorbachev’s speech, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Trotsky’s warning that the Stalinist bureaucracy, unless overthrown by the working class, would ultimately destroy the Soviet Union and clear the way for the restoration of capitalism was vindicated.

**Endnotes:**
[4] Ibid. [return]
[10] Ibid, p. xiii. [return]
[11] For example, at the first Moscow Trial, the defendant Holtzman testified that he had been sent as a courier to Copenhagen in 1932, where he supposedly met Trotsky’s son Leon Sedov at the Hotel Bristol and received from him seditious anti-Soviet instructions. It soon emerged that Copenhagen’s Hotel Bristol had burned down in a fire fifteen years earlier, in 1917. The crucial conspiratorial meeting could not have taken place. At the second trial, the Old Bolshevik and former Left Oppositionist Yuri Pyatakov testified that while in Berlin in December 1935 on Soviet business, he had secretly flown to Oslo. Pyatakov claimed he had been driven to Trotsky’s home. Once there, Pyatakov — reciting a script that had been written by the NKVD interrogators — testified that Trotsky informed him of his [Trotsky’s] links to the intelligence agencies of Nazi Germany. Pyatakov then confessed that he agreed to join Trotsky’s anti-Soviet and pro-Nazi conspiracy. But even before the trial was over, Pyatakov’s testimony was blown to pieces. The Norwegian press reported that no foreign plane had landed in Oslo’s airport between September 1935 and May 1936! Pyatakov’s story, which was absolutely central to the entire Stalinist frame-up, was exposed as a brazen concoction. [return]
[14] Ibid. [return]
[16] Ibid. [return]
[17] Ibid, pp. 1-2. [return]
[18] Ibid. [return]
[19] A review of this volume by an academic journal, *The History Teacher*, substantiates this appraisal of its target audience: “In regard to teaching and classroom use, this edition should find considerable acceptance. Unlike others in the series, this work does not promise to lose its readers in a host of overquotations from its figure’s philosophical or political expositions. It succinctly describes Trotsky’s achievements and provides the reader with the varying historical interpretations of his career.

“A worthy instructor of any modern Russian course should be able to make effective use of the text by utilizing the relatively short selections as jumping off points for further examination of their author’s full theses.

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