

Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification

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

Part 4: The relevance of Trotsky

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

Trotsky, by Geoffrey Swain. 237 pages, Longman, 2006.
Trotsky, by Ian D. Thatcher. 240 pages, Routledge, 2003.

Thatcher on the impossibility of revolution

There are two persistent and interrelated arguments Thatcher makes repeatedly in his biography: 1) There is no reason to believe that either Russian or European history would have developed any differently had Trotsky defeated Stalin; and 2) Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin were, on the whole, unfair. Dealing with economic policy, Thatcher states, "Of course, even if by some miracle Trotsky had been able to grasp the reins of power, there are many reasons to doubt whether he would have enjoyed the sorts of policy successes his program promised. One can question, for example, whether a Soviet economy managed by Trotsky could have provided industrial expansion and improved living standards." [83]

Yes, "one can question" anything. But the issue is not whether one can determine, to the point of certainty, the success of the program of the Left Opposition. Certainty is not attainable, nor is that the issue. The real question is: did the Left Opposition demonstrate significantly greater understanding of the problems of the Soviet economy than the Stalinist leadership, and did the Left Opposition exhibit far greater foresight than the bureaucracy in anticipating problems and proposing ameliorative action before disaster struck? To these two critical questions, we can reply unambiguously in the affirmative. On this basis, we can then ask whether — based on a more timely response to looming dangers and the avoidance of their worst consequences — it is reasonable to believe that the Soviet economy would have achieved greater successes and with far fewer human sacrifices. Here, too, the answer is clearly yes. Thatcher never explores the issues in this way. He makes no reference to the detailed program produced by the Left Opposition in 1927. Instead, we are left with a peculiar form of fatalism that translates into a historical apology for Stalin and Stalinism. Thatcher takes this same approach to every important issue of international revolutionary policy.

Turning to the disastrous defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927, in which Stalin's subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the bourgeois Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-shek played a major role, Thatcher asserts that "even had the CCP abandoned the Kuomintang in 1926, there is no evidence to suggest that it could have enjoyed any greater success in 1927." [84] What "evidence" has Thatcher assessed? Where did he

conduct research into the events of 1925-27? There is a rich body of political and historical literature, a significant amount of which was produced by Chinese revolutionaries, analyzing the catastrophic consequences of Stalin's policies in the period of 1925-27.

There is no evidence that Thatcher is in the least familiar with this literature. It is a historical fact that Chiang Kai-shek's massacre of Shanghai workers in April 1927 was facilitated by the failure of the Communist Party to take defensive measures that might have either forestalled the attack, or at least allowed the cadre to beat it back. The passivity of the CCP was dictated by Stalin's insistence that the Chinese Communists avoid antagonizing Chiang and the bourgeois Kuomintang. For nearly a year, Trotsky and the Left Opposition warned of the suicidal dangers arising from such a policy. To claim that even if their warnings had been acted upon in a timely manner they would have made no difference is to elevate hopelessness to the status of an immutable historical condition, at least as far as socialist revolution is concerned.

On the question of Germany, Thatcher argues along the same lines. "There is a certain attraction to Trotsky's account of KPD blunders and the possibility that had the German communists adopted a different course Hitler's triumph could have been avoided," Thatcher writes. "The support such a case has received in subsequent studies is hardly surprising. After all, who does not wish that the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) had never taken power? One can still question, however, whether history would have been so different had Trotsky had a greater influence on events. ... Trotsky overestimated the power of the workers and underestimated the strength of fascism. It is possible that Hitler would have risen to power even over a coalition of communists and social democrats. ... A change in KPD policies as demanded by Trotsky might have been insufficient to keep the NSDAP from government." [85]

The critical role played by the catastrophic policies of the two main working class parties — the SPD and KPD — in facilitating Hitler's victory is not a matter of serious historical controversy. There are, of course, many questions as to why these parties pursued such disastrous and self-destructive policies. But it is as close to a historical certainty as anything can be that the working class parties, despite their millions of members, pursued policies that ultimately reduced themselves to a state of complete political impotence. To state that the action or inaction of two mass parties would, in any event, have had no effect on the outcome of the political struggle in Germany, that Hitler would have conquered *no matter what*, is to render the whole subject of the working class movement and socialist politics politically and historically irrelevant. This

is the conclusion that flows inevitably from Thatcher's argument.[86]

While Thatcher repeatedly insists that the adoption of Trotsky's policies would have made no difference whatsoever, he argues time and again against Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin. He is so unshakeable in his hostility toward Trotsky and sympathy for Stalin that one cannot help but think that his work is driven by an unstated political agenda. Long ago, in his justly famous *What Is History?*, E.H. Carr advised us to listen carefully for the buzzing of bees in a historian's bonnet. The bees in a good historian's bonnet emit a pleasing and sophisticated sound that harmonizes beautifully with the factual material that it accompanies. But the bees in Mr. Thatcher's bonnet emit a very loud, discordant and tendentious sound, rather like Stalinist horns. My concern here is not Thatcher's politics — to which he is personally entitled — but his treatment of historical facts. The bees (or even horns) only become a serious problem when their buzzing is so loud that one cannot hear the history.

Thatcher defends Stalin

Defending Stalin against Trotsky's criticism, Thatcher declares that the latter's "thesis of a Stalinist betrayal of world revolution is as one-sided as it is unconvincing. It ignores, for example, the positive aspects of the Popular-Front tactic, evident in the expansion of the communist parties' support and influence." [87] At this point, as Professor Thatcher approaches the conclusion of his biography, the distinction between history writing and tendency polemics has been obliterated. The pretense of writing a biography is virtually dropped, and the reader is being fed what used to be called the Stalinist party-line. Thatcher, extolling the Stalinist "successes" of the Popular Front era, ignores Trotsky's analysis of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, which implemented — in the aftermath of the catastrophes of Stalinist "Third Period" ultra-leftism — the shift toward alliances with bourgeois parties. Thatcher makes no mention of Trotsky's assessment that the Seventh Congress and the adoption of Popular Frontism signified the repudiation of any link between the Comintern and the perspective of socialist revolution — a development rooted in the foreign policy interests of the Stalinist regime in the USSR. This assessment, it should be pointed out, was endorsed by E.H. Carr, in *The Twilight of the Comintern*. [88]

Thatcher continues, "There is also no evidence to confirm Trotsky's contention, however, that Comintern tactics were dependent on the demands of Soviet diplomacy." [89] Here, Thatcher is not only arguing against Trotsky, but the overwhelming weight of historical evidence. An author who makes such a claim surrenders any right to be taken seriously as a historian. How would Thatcher explain the overnight change in the policies of Communist parties all over the world, after the negotiation of the Stalin-Hitler Pact of August 1939? There is also the matter of the physical liquidation of large numbers of leading members of national Communist parties during the Stalinist Terror of 1937-39. Virtually the entire leadership of the Polish Communist Party was wiped out, because Stalin deemed it susceptible to Trotskyist influences. Large sections of the old leadership of the German Communist Party, which had escaped Hitler by fleeing to the USSR, were executed in Moscow during the Terror. The KPD General Secretary, Ernst Thaelmann, who had been captured by the Nazis, was abandoned by Stalin, who declined an opportunity to have him released to Soviet custody after the signing of the Pact with Hitler. Thaelmann perished in a concentration camp. The leadership that emerged from Soviet exile in 1945 to assume control of what was to become the East German state consisted of individuals who had been left alive by Stalin — often at the price of denouncing their KPD comrades. Does not all this constitute a form of subordination of Communist parties to the dictates of the Soviet regime?

An understanding of the pervasive Soviet influence in the policies of the Comintern requires an examination of the activities of the GPU (which became the NKVD), the secret police of the Stalinist regime. Trotsky

examined this issue in detail in one of his last *articles*: *The GPU*, which he completed less than two weeks before his own assassination by a Stalinist agent. [90] Citing the testimony of Walter Krivitsky, who defected from the GPU, and Benjamin Gitlow, an ex-member of the leadership of the American Communist Party, Trotsky documented the control exerted by GPU agents over the Stalinist organizations. He included an analysis of financial transactions, demonstrating how the flow of cash was used to direct and control the policies of local Stalinist parties. He also demonstrated the financial dependence of these parties on cash from Moscow. Thatcher does not examine, analyze and reply to this document — the last major statement written by Trotsky before his death on August 21, 1940. He simply ignores it.

Thatcher also mounts an impassioned defense of Stalin on another front. He writes, "Finally, Trotsky clearly underestimated the capacity of the USSR to withstand a German declaration of war, which eventually occurred in June 1941. Stalin proved himself a capable war leader, standing firm at the helm in the initial confusion surrounding the first moments of the German attack." [91] Two issues are raised here: first, Trotsky's assessment of the resilience of the Soviet Union in the event of war; second, Stalin's role as a war leader. In response to the first, Thatcher again falsifies Trotsky's position. He does not cite from Trotsky's most comprehensive statement on the Soviet Union's powers of resistance in the event of war. *The Red Army*, written by Trotsky in March 1934, came to a conclusion that is the exact opposite to the one attributed to him by Thatcher. "He who is able to read the books of history," wrote Trotsky, "will understand beforehand that should the Russian Revolution, which has continued ebbing and flowing for almost 30 years — since 1905 — be forced to direct its stream into the channel of war, it will unleash a terrific and overwhelming force." [92] This statement hardly qualifies as an underestimation of the USSR.

As for Thatcher's special tribute to Stalin as a war leader, it is curious that he chooses to cite specifically his activities during the "first moments of the German attack." He certainly knows that there are many questions surrounding Stalin's response to the German invasion of June 22, 1941. In numerous books, including the memoirs of leading Soviet officials, it has been claimed that Stalin was emotionally devastated by the news of the invasion, which exposed the utter bankruptcy of his diplomatic game with Hitler and now confronted the USSR with the possibility of total ruin. Thatcher is not unaware of this, and includes a footnote, which states: "Several textbooks claim that when Germany invaded the USSR Stalin was thrown into a panic and it would have been possible to overthrow him ... These claims are convincingly refuted by S.J. Main, 'Stalin in 1941.'" [93]

To claim that the controversy surrounding Stalin's activities in the aftermath of the German invasion has been "convincingly refuted" by Professor Main's brief two-page article, which is merely a comment on a much longer article by another historian, is a travesty of scholarly judgment and an exercise in political apologetics. [94] Moreover, the issue of what Stalin did or did not do in the last week of June 1941, after the Nazis invaded, is of secondary significance in assessing his responsibility for the catastrophe that overwhelmed the Soviet Union. The horrifying human losses suffered by the Soviet people were the direct consequence of the policies and actions of Stalin: the murder of the leading Soviet marshals and generals (such as Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Gamarnik, Blucher, Yegorov, and Primakov); the extermination of 75 percent of the Red Army officer corps in 1937-38; the killing of the finest representatives of the socialist intelligentsia and working class; the systematic disorganization and dismantling of Soviet military defenses so as not to provoke Hitler; the refusal to act on intelligence that a German invasion was imminent; etc. All this has been amply documented in innumerable books and scholarly articles. But Thatcher ignores it and proclaims that a

two page comment in one journal settles the question of Stalin's role in World War II.[95]

Thatcher's references to "the Bronsteins"

Beneath the accumulating weight of the falsification of Trotsky's life and crude apologies for Stalin, the intentions of the author himself appear increasingly dubious, not only in an intellectual sense but in a moral one as well. In this regard, it is necessary to take note of Thatcher's repeated references to Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, as "the Bronsteins." I noted no less than nine occasions when Thatcher refers to the couple in this way, usually when describing their private living arrangements or their movement from one place of exile to another. Thatcher tells us that "The Bronsteins were living largely off credit in Vienna" (p. 52); "Finally, the Bronsteins were allowed to go to Barcelona" (p. 77); "the Bronsteins were taken over the border" (p. 164); Prinkipo "provided a home for the majority of the Bronsteins" (p. 165); "in France, for example, the Bronsteins had no less than a dozen addresses of varying leases" (p. 188); "The move to North America, where the Bronsteins arrived in mid-January 1937..." (p. 189); and so on. Why does Thatcher so persistently identify Trotsky and Sedova as "the Bronsteins"? First of all, there is no factual basis for doing so. The two people he is referring to did not make use of that surname. Trotsky's wife, Natalia, was known by her own legal family name, Sedova. The two children of Lev Davidovitch and Natalya — Lev and Sergei — used Sedov as their surname. Trotsky, aside from the fact that he never referred to himself as Bronstein after 1902, used Sedov as his own legal name.

This is not, as might first seem to those unfamiliar with Trotsky's life, a small matter. Like every other aspect of his life, even the name by which he and his family were identified assumed political significance. In January 1937, Trotsky commented on the fact that the Soviet press, upon reporting the arrest of his youngest son on charges of sabotage, referred to him as Sergei *Bronstein*.

Trotsky wrote, "Since 1902 I have invariably borne the name of Trotsky. In view of my illegality, my children under czarism were recorded under their mother's family name — Sedov. So as not to force them to change the name to which they had become accustomed, under Soviet power I took for 'civic purposes' the name Sedov (according to Soviet law, a husband can, as is well known, take the name of the wife). The Soviet passport under which I, my wife, and elder son were sent into exile was made out in the name of the Sedov family. My sons, thus, have never used the name Bronstein. Just why is it now necessary to drag out this name? The answer is obvious: because of its Jewish sound. To this it is necessary to add that my son is accused of nothing more or less than an attempt to slaughter workers. Is this really so different from accusing the Jews of ritually using the blood of Christians?"[96]

It is impossible to believe that Thatcher is not familiar with this and other occasions where Trotsky denounced and identified the use of his original family name as an anti-Semitic ploy. Knowing that it is factually incorrect to do so, why then does Thatcher refer to the Bronsteins, rather than the Trotskys or the Sedovs? The moral burden falls upon him to dispel the legitimate suspicion that certain base calculations are in play. I am not stating that Thatcher is an anti-Semite. But it is beyond doubt that he is, for whatever reasons, repeatedly calling to the reader's attention the Jewish origins of Trotsky.[97] He should explain his reasons for doing so.

Thatcher's falsification of the Dewey Commission

Thatcher devotes about two pages to the Moscow Trials and Trotsky's struggle to refute their charges. He discusses the formation of the Dewey Commission, and the hearings that were held in April 1937 in Mexico "where the Bronsteins were lodging." [98] After a brief review of the proceedings and the testimony of Leon Trotsky, Thatcher arrives at the Commission's findings. He writes, "*The Moscow trials were declared an*

unreliable guide to the truth, the accusations against Trotsky unproven [emphasis DN]."[99]

This is a falsification of the findings of the Dewey Commission. On September 21, 1937, the Commission announced its findings, of which there were 23. The first 21 consisted of refutations of specific allegations against Trotsky that were crucial to the claims of the Soviet prosecutors. The decisive summary conclusions were presented in Findings 22 and 23. They stated, "22. We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups. 23. We therefore find Trotsky and [his son] Sedov not guilty." [100]

Note the difference between the words used by the Dewey Commission and those selected by Thatcher. There is a profound difference between defining a proceeding as a "frame-up" (the word used by the Dewey Commission) and "an unreliable guide to the truth" (the words used by Thatcher). A frame-up is a pseudo-legal proceeding in which evidence is contrived and concocted to produce a predetermined verdict of guilty. It is not merely an "unreliable guide to truth." Its aim is the suppression of truth and it makes use of lies to facilitate, under a pseudo-legal cover, the imprisonment or execution of a wrongfully-accused individual. Thatcher could have simply quoted finding 22 of the Dewey Commission. Instead he used five words "unreliable guide to the truth" to say something very different from the one word "frame-up" used by the Commission.[101]

There is also a fundamental *legal* difference between a finding of not guilty (handed down by the Dewey Commission) and a verdict of "unproven" (the term used by Thatcher). A verdict of not guilty leaves the presumption of the defendant's innocence undisturbed. A verdict of "unproven" is quite a different matter. It carries the implication that while there existed insufficient evidence to return a verdict of guilty, the jury was not convinced of the innocence of the accused. Thatcher, who lived and taught in Glasgow for many years, knows very well the distinction between "not guilty" and "unproven." One of the peculiarities of Scot law is that it allows juries to return a verdict of "not proven." This has been a subject of substantial legal controversy for several centuries precisely because of the lingering moral shadow that the so-called "third verdict" leaves behind on the accused.[102] It requires a high degree of naiveté to believe that Thatcher's substitution of "unproven" for the words "not guilty" is an innocent error. He is unquestionably guilty of deliberately falsifying the findings of the Dewey Commission.

What, the reader may ask, is the purpose of such a falsification? And why should one treat it as such a grave matter? The reader should bear in mind the methods employed by Thatcher and Swain, which we have already examined. As they quote each other and their own works are cited by others, the virus of falsification spreads insidiously via a complacent academic community into the broader public. In this particular example, the immense original force of the Dewey Commission verdict is diluted and falsified. As the denunciation of the Moscow trials as a frame-up and the unambiguous acquittal of Trotsky and Sedov fall from historical memory, Thatcher's formulations — eventually to be recycled by other careless historians — contribute to the erosion of previously-established facts and objective truth.

Thatcher's final comments on Trotsky's historical role

After more than 200 pages of distortions, half-truths and outright falsifications, we arrive at Thatcher's final appraisal of Trotsky. "Trotsky," he informs his readers, "was not a great political leader or prophet. He spent the majority of his political life in opposition, the exponent of views commanding minority support." [103] To this remark his readers should respond, "Well, Professor Thatcher, that is simply your opinion." And, indeed, it is an opinion unsupported by credible scholarly work, and therefore the reader has no reason to take it particularly seriously. One is reminded of Hegel's admonition, "What is more useless than a string of bald opinions, and what is more unimportant?" [104] As for the basis of this opinion — that Trotsky spent most of his life in

opposition — this tells us more about Thatcher's views and character than it does about the revolutionary leader upon whom he is passing judgment.

Thatcher continues, "Is there anything of lasting merit in Trotsky's works, or were he and his writings of relevance only to his time and experience? An answer to this question will depend, at least in part, on how one rates Marxism and Trotsky's standing as a Marxist.

"To begin with the latter question, it is doubtful whether Trotsky made any lasting contribution to Marxist thought. He may even have been unaware of some of Marx's basic writings. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, for example, Trotsky insisted several times that Marx had nothing to say about Russia, that the master expected a socialist revolution to begin in the countries of advanced capitalism. This ignores Marx's interest in the question of whether 'backward' Russia could bypass capitalism and undertake a direct transition to socialism on the basis of the peasant commune.

"Marx's response, of evident relevance to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, was given in several of his writings, including the Preface to the (1881) Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. Here Marx answered in the affirmative. A Russian Revolution could aim at a direct transition to socialism, but only if it sparked socialist revolutions in the advanced West. If Trotsky had been aware of this and other texts in which Marx addressed the problem of building socialism in Russia, he would surely have claimed a stronger link between the theory of permanent revolution and Marx, as well as less originality for his conception of the revolutionary process in Russia. If we assume that Trotsky did not know of Marx's concern with Russia, then this points to the conclusion that Trotsky's Marxism was a product of the Russian environment [emphasis DN]."[105]

In this passage the author combines, in equal measure, ignorance and insolence. This is the sort of writing that could have appeared in scores of Stalinist journals prior to the collapse of the USSR. The specific claim that Trotsky "insisted that Marx had nothing to say about Russia," is a crass misrepresentation of what Trotsky wrote. He explained precisely why it was impossible to derive from a mechanical application of Marx's historical conceptions an analysis of Soviet society.[106] In this, Trotsky demonstrated not his ignorance of Marx's work, but his creative approach to Marxism. Moreover, he based key arguments in *Revolution Betrayed* on observations of Marx. Trotsky, to cite just one example, employed the concept of "generalized want," suggested by Marx in *The German Ideology*, to explain the origins and social function of the bureaucracy in the USSR as the "gendarme" — the police enforcer of social inequality.

Thatcher's claim that Trotsky was not aware of Marx's writings in 1881 on the prospects for socialism in Russia, and, moreover, that the former did not recognize the link between his own theory of permanent revolution and Marx's work is easily contradicted. Thatcher apparently has not read the essay, "Marxism and the Relation between Proletarian and Peasant Revolution," written in December 1928. Trotsky specifically reviewed the 1881 correspondence between Marx and the old Russian revolutionist Vera Zasulich, in which Marx worked through the theoretical issues that were concisely summed up in the January 1882 (not 1881 as Thatcher writes) preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. As for his own intellectual debt to Marx, Trotsky wrote in this essay that "the idea of permanent revolution was one of the most important ideas of Marx and Engels." [107] So here we have Thatcher arguing in his conclusion that Trotsky was unfamiliar with key writings of Marx on the subject of Russia, and it turns out that this fantastic hypothesis is merely the product of Thatcher's failure to do his basic intellectual homework! [108]

Having sarcastically posed the question of Trotsky's relevance, Thatcher should tell us why he has written a 240-page book to proclaim his irrelevance. Why did he establish, with his former colleague from the University of Glasgow, James D. White, the short-lived *Journal of*

Trotsky, whose publication represented Thatcher's first anti-Trotsky project? Why has Swain written his 236-page biography?

It is worth noting that Thatcher has no doubts about the relevance of Stalin. In a review of several studies of Stalin that appeared around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the dictator's death, Thatcher, revealing the bees in his bonnet, confessed a certain nostalgia for "a benign version of Stalinism," adding, "Stalin continues to fascinate and to cause moments of moral uncertainty." [109] What sort of moral uncertainty, one is compelled to wonder, can be caused by the actions of a blood-drenched tyrant who slaughtered an entire generation of socialists, betrayed the principles of the October Revolution, and set into motion the process that led to the destruction of the Soviet Union?

Conclusion

It has been an unpleasant experience to work through the volumes of Mr. Swain and Mr. Thatcher. Despite the length of this essay, I have by no means answered all the distortions and falsifications that appear in their work. Such a comprehensive account would require nothing less than a volume of its own. But I believe that this review has established that neither biography has the slightest scholarly merit. Still, the questions remain: Why have these books been written? What is their purpose? The answer, I believe, is to be found in politics. While Thatcher speculates cynically at the conclusion of his book on the relevance of its subject, he hardly believes that Trotsky is so marginal a historical figure. Indeed, Thatcher's obsessive interest in Trotsky suggests he holds privately a very different view. And well he should, for the significance of Trotsky as a historical figure is inextricably linked to the vicissitudes of the international class struggle. To determine the relevance of Trotsky, one must ask several other questions: What is the relevance of socialism? What is the relevance of Marxism? What is the relevance of the class struggle in modern society? Has capitalism attained a new and permanent level of stability? Has the very concept of a "crisis of capitalism" become historically outmoded? These are the questions that must be asked when considering the place of Trotsky in history and the significance of his ideas in the contemporary world.

Leon Trotsky's ideas do not seem all that remote in the light of objective developments. First, the developments in technology and their impact upon the processes of production and exchange have produced a global economy that places tremendous strains on the old national-state structures. Moreover, the precipitous decline in the world economic position of the United States significantly limits the likelihood of a new world order that will regulate inter-state relations and maintain global stability. The world capitalist system is heading toward a systemic breakdown on the scale of the period of 1914-45.

The fragility of the existing global economic and geo-political order has been intensified by domestic class-based social tensions. During the past quarter century, we have witnessed a collapse of the old mass parties and organizations of the working class. It is hard to think of a political party anywhere in the world that retains any significant degree of credibility among the masses. The old Communist parties, Social Democratic parties, and Labour parties have either collapsed — as is the case with most of the Stalinist organizations — or stagger as organizations sustained only by a thoroughly corrupt apparatus. To describe them as "working class" is to completely abuse the historical meaning of the term. They are all right-wing bourgeois parties, no less committed to the defense of capitalism and the imperialist interests of the global transnationals than the old traditional bourgeois parties.

But this collapse of every form of Stalinist and Social Democratic reformist-based working class organization proceeds against the backdrop of rising social inequality and intensifying class antagonisms. The old organizations simply lack the political means and credibility to harness the deepening social discontent and channel it into paths that do not

threaten the stability of the capitalist system. At some point the intensification of class conflict will find intellectual and political expression. There will be a search for alternatives to the present set-up. This will create an intellectual and social constituency for a revival of interest in the history of the socialist movement, in the revolutionary struggles of the past. It is inevitable that the development of such a climate will lead to a renewed interest in the life and work of Leon Trotsky. That is what happened during the last great wave of radicalization of workers and students. The more politically-thoughtful sections of the bourgeoisie recognize this danger and fear it. It is worth noting the perceptive words of Robert J. Alexander, who remarked in his encyclopedic volume on *International Trotskyism*, published by Duke University in 1991:

“Although International Trotskyism does not enjoy the support of a well established regime, as did the heirs of Stalinism, the persistence of the movement in a wide variety of countries together with the instability of the political life of most of the world’s nations means that the possibility that a Trotskyist party might come to power in the foreseeable future cannot be totally ruled out.”[110]

This is, as we know, the era of preemptive war, and these works represent a sort of preemptive strike against the reemergence of Trotskyist influence. This is why distinguished publishing houses like Routledge and Longman commission biographies such as those produced by Swain and Thatcher.

The political crisis intersects with a profound intellectual crisis. How is one to explain the benign reception of these two miserable books? It is, I believe, bound up with the predominance, for more than a quarter century, of truly reactionary modes of thought, associated with post-modernism, which repudiate the very concept of objective truth. In the course of this review essay, I have referred several times to E. H. Carr, and I will do so again. Nearly a half-century ago, he warned against the infiltration into history of the Nietzschean principle, formulated in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “The falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it...”[111] The contemporary repudiation of objective truth, supported by the claim that the only issue is the internal coherence of a narrative, which is to be judged on its own terms, is inimical to serious scholarly work, or even to rational thought. It encourages a climate where “anything goes,” where falsification flourishes, where there is no protest when lies are told about history.

And what does this mean? I began this essay with a review of the Moscow Trials and Stalin’s Terror. I explained that what started with historical falsification ended with mass murder. That process is repeating itself in our own time. Whoever wishes to consider the implications and consequences of historical lies has only to consider the lies that were employed to prepare public opinion for the war in Iraq. “Weapons of mass destruction” was a lie that has already led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

A new generation now confronts immense and life-threatening problems. Everywhere it faces crisis and decay. The very future of the planet is in question if answers are not found to the crisis of the world capitalist system. The study of history must play a central role in the discovery of those answers required by humanity in the twenty-first century. But how can history be studied if its record is falsified? The working people and youth of the world need truth, and the struggle to discover and defend it is the intellectual driving force of human progress.

Endnotes:

[83] Thatcher, p. 151. [return]

[84] Thatcher, p. 156. [return]

[85] Thatcher, pp. 179-81. [return]

[86] The argument that Hitler’s victory was in any sense inevitable is not made by any serious contemporary historian. Indeed, emphasis has generally been placed on the extremely contingent character of Hitler’s

accession to power. As Ian Kershaw, the author of a widely-respected two volume biography of Hitler, has written, “There was no inevitability about Hitler’s accession to power. Had Hindenburg been prepared to grant to Schleicher the dissolution that he had readily allowed Papen, and to prorogue the Reichstag for a period beyond the constitutional sixty days, a Hitler Chancellorship might have been avoided. With the corner turning of the economic Depression, and with the Nazi movement facing potential break-up if power were not soon attained, the future — even if under an authoritarian government — would have been very different. Even as the cabinet argued outside Hindenburg’s door at eleven o’clock on 30 January, keeping the President waiting, there was a possibility that a Hitler Chancellorship might not materialize. Hitler’s rise from humble beginnings to ‘seize’ power by ‘triumph of the will’ was the stuff of Nazi legend. In fact, political miscalculation by those with regular access to the corridors of power rather than any actions on the part of the Nazi leader played a larger role in placing him in the Chancellor’s seat” (*Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, New York, 1998), p. 424. [return]

[87] Thatcher, p. 203. [return]

[88] Carr wrote that “the seventh congress had brought into the open the deep-seated trend, long apparent to the discerning critic, to identify the aims of Comintern with the policies of the USSR; and, after the paradoxical success of the congress, the institution seemed to have lost its reality. It was significant that no further congress, and no major session of the IKKI [the executive body of the Comintern], was ever again summoned. Comintern continued to discharge subordinate functions, while the spotlight of publicity was directed elsewhere. Trotsky’s verdict that the seventh congress would ‘pass into history as the liquidation congress’ of Comintern was not altogether unfair. The seventh congress pointed the way to the *dénouement* of 1943 [the formal dissolution of the Communist International” (*Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-35*, New York, 1982), p. 427. [return]

[89] Thatcher, p. 204 [return]

[90] *The Comintern and the GPU* is published in the volume *Stalin’s Gangsters*, by Leon Trotsky, published in London by New Park in 1977. The late Harold Robins (1908-1987), who served as the captain of Trotsky’s guard in Coyoacan in 1939-40, advised the publishers that Trotsky had suggested this title for a collection of articles on the activities of the GPU. [return]

[91] Thatcher, p. 206. [return]

[92] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34* (New York, 1975), p. 259. [return]

[93] Thatcher, p. 234. [return]

[94] The article referred to by Thatcher is “Stalin in June 1941: A Comment on Cynthia Roberts,” by Steven J. Main, in *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 48, No. 5 (July 1996), pp. 837-39. Professor Main’s comment was in reply to Cynthia Roberts’ “Planning for War: The Red Army and the Catastrophe of 1941,” in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 8 (December 1995), pp. 1293-1326. [return]

[95] Declaring an intensely controversial historical issue settled is one of Thatcher’s favorite rhetorical tricks. He locates an article that supports his opinion and then proclaims it to be “convincing.” Of course, many experts remain unconvinced. For example, on the matter of Stalin’s responsibility for the catastrophe of 1941, David E. Murphy writes: “Stalin’s personal responsibility for the monumental losses of the war years, particularly those suffered in the first tragic months of the war, cannot be minimized or denied” (*What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa*, New Haven and London: 2005), p. 247. [return]

[96] “Anti-Semitic Devices,” January 30, 1937 (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37*, New York, 1978), p. 177. [return]

[97] It would not be illegitimate for a biographer to explore the cultural, psychological and political implications of Trotsky’s Jewish origins. Some earlier biographers have already attempted, though not with great

success, to do so. But Thatcher shows no particular interest in this theme, and this makes his heavy-handed and factually-incorrect references to “the Bronsteins” especially odd and suspect. [return]

[98] Thatcher, p. 197. [return]

[99] Thatcher, *ibid.* [return]

[100] *John Dewey, Volume 11: 1935-37*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 323. [return]

[101] In remarks made upon the release of the Summary of Findings, John Dewey stated that “the members of the commission have been without exception appalled by the utterly discreditable character of the whole Moscow trial proceedings, at once flimsy and vicious.” [Ibid, p. 324] [return]

[102] The novelist Sir Walter Scott famously denounced it as the “bastard verdict.” [return]

[103] Thatcher, p. 224. [return]

[104] *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, tr. E.S. Haldane and Francis H. Simpson (London and New York, 1974), Volume One, p. 12. [return]

[105] Thatcher, p. 215 [return]

[106] What Trotsky actually wrote, in a relevant passage, is the following: “Moreover, Marx expected that the Frenchman would begin the social revolution, the German continue it, and the English finish it; and as to the Russian, Marx left him far in the rear. But this conceptual order was upset by the facts. Whoever tries now mechanically to apply the universal historic conception of Marx to the particular case of the Soviet Union at the given stage of its development will be entangled at once in hopeless contradictions” (*The Revolution Betrayed*, Detroit, 1991), pp. 40-41. [return]

[107] *The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1928-29* (New York, 1981), p. 349. [return]

[108] Thatcher has also overlooked the speech delivered by Trotsky on November 14, 1922 at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. Trotsky directly addressed Marx’s speculations about the possibility of a transition to socialism based on the peasant communes. He said: “In 1883 Marx, writing to Nicholas Danielson, one of the theoreticians of Russian populism (*Narodnikism*), that should the proletariat assume power in Europe before the Russian *obschina* (communal village agriculture) had been completely abolished by history then even this *obschina* could become one of the starting points for Communist development in Russia. And Marx was absolutely right.” [“The NEP and World Revolution,” in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. Two (London, 1974), p. 230] [return]

[109] “Stalin and Stalinism: A Review Article,” in *Europe-Asia Studies* (Volume 56, No. 6, September 2004), p. 918. [return]

[110] Alexander, p. 32. [return]

[111] Cited in Carr, *What Is History?*, p. 27. [return]

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