

“A book that fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship”

The American Historical Review discredits Robert Service’s biography of Leon Trotsky

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The *American Historical Review*, among the oldest and most prestigious academic journals in the United States, has published in its June 2011 issue a critical examination of two books: the denunciatory biography *Trotsky* by British historian Robert Service and *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, by David North, the chairman of both the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The author of the combined review is the historian Bertrand Patenaude, a lecturer in history and international relations at Stanford University, and a fellow at the Hoover Institute. He is also the author of *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, published by Harper Collins in 2009.

Service’s biography was published to great acclaim in 2009. Its relentless attack on Trotsky guaranteed Service the praise of the reactionary British press, which in one review described the biography as the “second assassination” of Trotsky. The author did nothing to discourage such degraded commendations. At a book launch in London, in October 2009, Robert Service declared: “There’s life in the old boy Trotsky yet—but if the ice pick didn’t quite do its job killing him off, I hope I’ve managed it.”

North’s *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* was published by Mehring Books in 2010. A substantial portion of the book is devoted to a detailed refutation of Service’s biography.

In his review essay Patenaude undertakes an examination of the historical accuracy of Service’s portrayal of Trotsky and, within that context, the validity of North’s attack on the biography.

The result of Patenaude’s investigation of the controversy is an unequivocal condemnation of Service’s biography and explicit endorsement of North’s critique.

For those who are accustomed to reading academic journals, in which criticisms are generally offered in prose that is cautious and restrained, the unsparing bluntness of Patenaude’s appraisal of Service as a biographer and

historian will come as a shock.

Patenaude begins by summarizing the purpose of Service’s biography. “It appears that he [Service] set out to thoroughly discredit Trotsky as a historical figure and as a human being. His Trotsky is not merely arrogant, self-righteous, and self-absorbed; he is a mass murderer and a terrorist, a cold and heartless son, husband, father, and comrade, an intellectual lightweight who falsified the record of his role in the Russian Revolution and whose writings have continued to fool generations of readers—a hoax perpetrated by his hagiographer Isaac Deutscher. In his eagerness to cut Trotsky down, Service commits numerous distortions of the historical record and outright errors of fact to the point that the intellectual integrity of the whole enterprise is open to question.”

Patenaude continues:

“Enter David North. David North is an American Trotskyist whose book collects his review essays of Service’s volume and of earlier biographies of Trotsky by Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain. (He does not mention my 2009 book, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*.) Given North’s Trotskyism, he might reasonably be suspected of hyperbole in his brief against Service. But a careful examination of North’s book shows his criticism of Service to be exactly what Trotsky scholar Baruch Knei-Paz, in a blurb on the back cover, says it is: ‘detailed, meticulous, well-argued and devastating.’”

As Patenaude’s review unfolds, following the main strands of North’s critique, he substantiates his questioning of the “intellectual integrity” of Service’s “whole enterprise.” Patenaude indignantly rejects Service’s malicious portrayal of the young Trotsky who brutally deserted his first wife and left her destitute with two children. “In fact”, Patenaude writes, “Trotsky’s family in Russia helped support Sokolovskaya and their daughters, and she went to her death in the Great Terror as a

Trotskyist.”

Patenaude offers a damning assessment of Service’s basic competence as a historian. “The number of factual mistakes in Service’s book is, as North says, ‘astonishing.’ I have counted more than four dozen.” He asserts that “Service’s book is completely unreliable as a reference.” It is difficult to imagine a more damning appraisal by one historian of another’s work. Attempting to give readers a sense of his own disgust at the shoddiness of Service’s work, Patenaude adds: “At times the errors are jaw-dropping.”

Service’s crude mishandling of facts reflects a deeper problem: his ignorance of and disinterest in Trotsky’s ideas. Patenaude writes: “Service fails to examine in a serious way Trotsky’s political ideas in his writings and speeches – nor does it appear that he has always bothered to familiarize himself with them.” Patenaude points out that Service, who frequently misrepresents Trotsky’s ideas, even to the point of attributing to him conceptions relating to art that he actually argued against, “is not about to let the facts get in the way of his exposing the ‘crudity of Trotsky’s judgements’ about culture.”

Turning his attention to Service’s *ad hominem* attacks on the subject of his biography, Patenaude declares: “With no way to prove his case, Service relies on cheap shots and slanderous asides to keep his readers convinced that Trotsky is a despicable man.” He describes Service’s effort to discredit the 1937 Dewey Commission, which acquitted Trotsky of the charges leveled against him at the Moscow Trials, as “a travesty of the actual facts.”

Patenaude does not conceal his contempt for Service’s “crusade to place Trotsky alongside Stalin as one of the great revolutionary tyrants of the twentieth century.” But history speaks against Service. “Because of the way the story turned out – Trotsky was assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico in 1940 – Service has to huff and puff to try to convince his readers.” Patenaude adds with devastating effect: “But insinuation and *non sequiturs* can get Service only so far, so he must fabricate evidence.” Calling attention to Service’s claim that Trotsky had boasted of his willingness “to burn several thousand Russian workers to a cinder to create a true revolutionary American movement,” Patenaude points out that “North catches Service in an act of outright falsification.”

Patenaude also calls attention to grave deficiencies in Service’s basic research. He observes that Service has largely ignored the papers deposited by Trotsky at the Houghton Library at Harvard University shortly before his assassination.

Patenaude concludes his review with a damning judgment: “North calls Service’s biography a ‘piece of hackwork.’ Strong words, but entirely justified. Harvard University

Press has placed its imprimatur upon a book that fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship.”

Patenaude has handed down an indictment of Service that is as damning as it is unanswerable. There are no facts that Service can marshal to refute this exposure of his intellectual dishonesty and professional incompetence.

Basking in the praise of reactionary journalists and taking advantage of the cynical and intellectually cowardly climate that prevails in much of the academic community, Service assumed that his libelous falsification of Trotsky’s life and ideas would go unchallenged. And even if the Trotskyist movement called attention to his lies and distortions, who, Service assured himself, would care to take notice?

But Service made the mistake of assuming that his own cynicism is universally shared. And, bad historian that he is, Service could not imagine that changing objective conditions would lead to renewed interest in the life and ideas of Trotsky and other great Marxist revolutionists of the twentieth century. Although Bertrand Patenaude is neither a Marxist nor politically sympathetic to Trotsky, he does understand that Trotsky is a major historical figure whose ideas and actions must be treated seriously – that is, with intellectual honesty and, as Trotsky might have said, “fidelity to the truth.”

In the struggle for historical truth, the publication of Patenaude’s exposure of Service in the *American Historical Review* is a significant victory. Others will follow.

The Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (US)

David North’s In Defense of Leon Trotsky can be found at Mehring Books.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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