

A blow against the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification

By Wolfgang Weber
31 December 2011

Fourteen historians and political scientists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland have written an open letter opposing the publication by Suhrkamp Verlag of a German edition of the 2009 biography of Leon Trotsky by Robert Service. (See: “Letter from historians to German publisher Suhrkamp on Robert Service’s biography of Trotsky”).

Hermann Weber, professor of contemporary history in Mannheim and one of the authors of the letter, justified the intervention in a conversation with the *World Socialist Web Site* as follows: “Not because it argues against Trotsky’s political actions and views—that everyone is indeed free to do. But Service deals in lies, falsifications of history, dubious references and even anti-Semitic prejudices. Such pamphlets should not have a place in an academic publishing house with a liberal tradition and a history such as Suhrkamp.”

In their letter, the fourteen scientists associate themselves with the verdict reached by David North, who subjected Service’s book to a detailed and carefully researched critique. (1) In the prestigious historical journal *The American Historical Review* (June 2011), US historian Bertrand M. Patenaude likewise supported North’s critique.

Suhrkamp Verlag has de facto acknowledged the correctness of the criticism, feeling obliged to delay publication of Service’s book by almost a year. This is tantamount to an admission that it is not simply a matter of factual errors and misrepresentations that could be corrected relatively quickly. Rather, the book is a tendentious concoction whose character cannot simply be “corrected away.” It threatens to discredit the publisher in the scientific world, as well as with the firm’s readers and with its own authors.

Whether, as previously announced, the book will now appear in July 2012 remains open. But one thing is certain: Professor Robert Service has been discredited as a scientist. The same goes for all those in the media, scientific journals and universities who have praised his book because they agree with the objective announced by Service: to “completely destroy” Leon Trotsky as a person and as a figure in world history.

The Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification has thus received a severe blow. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians of this school—including Dmitri Volkogonov (Russia), Richard Pipes (US), Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher

(both UK)—rehashed the old Stalinist lies and falsifications about Trotsky to cut off the younger generation from the ideas of the most consistent Marxist opponents of Stalinism.

This played an important role in maintaining that there was no alternative to the introduction of capitalist relations in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. Many intellectuals, including numerous former Stalinists of both the Moscow and Beijing varieties, did not regard the reintroduction of capitalism in these countries to be the result of the decades of counterrevolutionary activity of Stalinism. In chorus with the Western governments and media, they said it was evidence of the “failure of socialism.” They upheld the big lie of the 20th Century, the identification of Stalinism with socialism—by means of which the Stalinists justified their rule just as the Western powers did their anti-communism.

Today, the consequences of capitalist restoration in these countries—a general social decline, desperate social inequality and criminal economic structures—coincides with the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s. Broad strata of the population in both East and West are looking for a social alternative. Under these circumstances, the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification plays an even more important role in distancing the younger generation from a socialist perspective.

For many years, the International Committee of the Fourth International has conducted a systematic theoretical offensive against this school. It has subjected the works of Volkogonov, Pipes, Swain, Thatcher, and Service to a careful critique, developing a close collaboration in the 1990s with the Russian historian Vadim Rogovin, whose seven-volume work *Was There An Alternative?* demonstrated in detail the enormous importance of the Trotskyist Left Opposition in the Soviet Union.

Now this offensive has found a resonance within professional circles of the political and historical sciences. The willingness of the 14 historians, regardless of their own political attitudes towards Trotsky, to take a principled stand and actively engage in the defence of historical truth, scientific standards and the integrity of historiography is an important indication of significant changes in contemporary intellectual life.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union twenty years ago, intellectual life was shaped by an extremely reactionary climate

that made difficult an open confrontation with the historical truth of the past and the undertaking of a serious study of history in schools and universities. Schools of philosophy and theories of history directed against Marxism and against science and enlightenment in general—such as the Frankfurt School, post-modernism, post-structuralism and others—experienced a revival.

These schools regarded the causes of the disasters of the 20th century to lie with the Enlightenment, the pursuit of scientific knowledge of nature and society, and not to have been caused by the defeats of the working class resulting from the policies of the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies. The goal of science to identify objective truths was called “presumptuous.” The “boundless development and application of modern science and technology” to overcome poverty, disease, ignorance and social inequality was considered to be a “menace to society” and even the “basis for totalitarian dictatorships.”

The claim that there was no alternative to Stalinism and that the socialist revolution of 1917 had led inevitably to Stalinist totalitarianism was linked to a rejection of critical historical study and to the conception that there was no such thing as objective reality or objective causal relationships.

Thinkers of this school such as Hayden White described the scientific presentation of historical contexts to be a form of “myth.” Roger Chartier declared that history did not deal with an objective reality of social development, but only with subjective perceptions (representations) of history, with the sensations of its witnesses and the interpretations of later descendants.

Jörg Baberowski, a professor at the Humboldt University of Berlin and spokesman of this subjectivist school in Germany, draws the conclusion: “The fact that we could learn from history is an illusion of days gone by... The claim (of the historian) to show how things actually were has been proved in reality to be an illusion. What the historian confronts in the sources is not the past... the past is a construction.” Elsewhere he writes: “Truth is what I and others hold to be true and confirm to each other as truth.... Therefore we must accept that there are multiple realities; that it depends on who talks to whom about what and with what arguments.” (2)

This approach gave free rein to the ideologues of the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification, who twisted sources and documents, falsified or suppressed them according to their own needs. For Baberowski, even such a “construction of the past” is but “one of several realities” and only “true” as long as it is shared by other “historians.”

In this climate of ignorance and contempt for historical truth, Robert Service felt secure that his diatribe against Leon Trotsky would be praised in the media and by other historians, if not enthusiastically welcomed, and that “his truth” would be accepted. In their arrogance, neither he nor his publisher felt it necessary to respond in any way to the extensive, carefully

documented critique made by David North.

But Service miscalculated. Post-structuralists, post-modernists and post-Soviet counterfeiters may prefer to deny the objectivity of history, but that will not stop history from catching up with them. What has happened since Service’s book was published in the UK and US in 2009, and in Spain in 2010, and received such uncritical praise?

For the first time in decades, the revolution in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 once again brought the working masses onto the stage of history, intervening in the political process. All over the world this has encouraged young working class layers to protest and fortified them in the fight against social inequality. This has also injected a fresh wind into intellectual life. Leon Trotsky, the theoretician and leader of the world socialist revolution and leader of the revolutionary masses, can no longer be suppressed by historical falsifications, slanders and the stirring up of racist sentiments.

The letter of the 14 historians to the Suhrkamp publishing house has opened the door for an honest and thorough examination of the role of Leon Trotsky and the rise and fall of Soviet power. For the youth and the working class, such an undertaking is crucial. Understanding the past is the basis for an orientation in the present and a progressive shaping of the future.

We appeal to Suhrkamp Verlag to abandon its plans to publish the book by Robert Service, and we invite all scholars and students to support the letter of the 14 historians and political scientists. Please contact psg@gleichheit.de and send comments and letters to be forwarded to Suhrkamp Verlag.

Notes

1) See: David North, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, Mehring Books 2010

2) Jörg Baberowski, *Die Entdeckung des Unbekannten—Russland und das Ende Osteuropas in Geschichte ist immer Gegenwart (The discovery of the unknown—Russia and the end of Eastern Europe in History is Always Present)*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 10f, and Jörg Baberowski, *Der Sinn der Geschichte (The Meaning of History)*, Munich 2005, pp. 28 and 30.

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