Leipzig meeting on Leon Trotsky and the defence of historical truth

300 hear David North critique Robert Service’s biography of Trotsky

By our correspondent
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David North, chairman of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site, spoke Friday night before a large and appreciative audience in Leipzig on his recently published book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* and its critique of the 2009 biography of Trotsky by the British author Robert Service.

The meeting at the University of Leipzig was held at the conclusion of the Leipzig book fair, where Mehring Publishers released the German edition of North’s defence of historical truth and the legacy of Trotsky. The Leipzig fair is one of the largest book fairs in the world. There was great interest at the event in the German publication of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* and the international controversy aroused by North’s exposure of Service’s historical falsifications.

This was reflected in the turnout at Friday’s meeting, organised by Mehring Publishers in cooperation with the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE). More than 300 people packed the lecture hall where the meeting was held.

The World Socialist Web Site will publish North’s lecture in full on Tuesday, March 20.

Wolfgang Weber, a member of the executive committee of the PSG, outlined the background to the meeting in an introductory report. He explained that North, in his book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, critically analysed Service’s biography of Trotsky, which was published by Harvard University Press in 2009.

North uncovered a host of grievous errors by the Oxford professor, including false presentations of historical documents, the use of dubious sources, and many factual errors, including incorrect dates and confusion of names. North showed that Service’s book employed the types of lies and calumnies against Trotsky pioneered by the Stalinist bureaucracy, and also appealed to anti-Semitic prejudices. Service’s book was, North demonstrated, a thoroughly tendentious concoction.

Although *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* was published by Mehring in 2010, the criticisms it raised were hushed up for nearly a year. “Since then, however, an international debate has commenced which reached the editorial boards and feature pages of major newspapers in Germany at the end of last year,” Weber said.

A year ago, the Suhrkamp publishing house announced that it would publish a German edition of Service’s biography of Trotsky in the summer of 2011. Subsequently, however, public opposition to Service’s book, inspired by North’s critique, emerged in international academic and intellectual circles.

Stanford University historian Bertrand Patenaude published an article in June 2011 in the prestigious *American Historical Review* in which he wrote that North’s critique was accurate and fully justified. He concluded 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.”

“In July 2011, 14 historians and political scientists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland wrote a letter to the Suhrkamp publishing house,” Weber continued. “The authors and signatories of the letter included Professor Hermann Weber, the doyen of German research into communism and Stalinism, and other internationally renowned experts. Based on the critiques of Service by North and Patenaude, they strongly recommended that Suhrkamp refrain from publishing the German edition of the biography.”

Suhrkamp suspended the planned publication and asked another expert to examine the allegations. In the event, Suhrkamp has decided to go ahead with publication of the book in 2012, without explaining the delay of more than a year.

The editorial boards of a number of German newspapers have reported on the controversy, Weber explained. “Significantly, *Junge Freiheit*, the ‘intellectual’ organ of the extreme right in Germany, was among the first to respond. Its columnist, Dr. Stefan Scheil, expressed great pleasure over the planned publication of Service’s book by Suhrkamp. He praised Service for his self-professed intention ‘to finish off Trotsky’ and complete the work begun by the Stalinist assassins of the revolutionary leader 72 years ago.”

Large-circulation German newspapers, including the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Berliner Zeitung*, published articles on the controversy that either sided with Service and Suhrkamp or failed to address any of the criticisms made by North and the historians.
who signed the letter to the German publishing house.

North began his presentation with an issue that gripped the audience: Trotsky’s struggle for a united front of the two German mass workers’ parties, the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party, to prevent the triumph of the Nazis.

“Between 1931 and 1933,” North explained, “Trotsky sought to arouse the most politically conscious sections of the German working class and the socialist intelligentsia to the immense danger posed by fascism and the urgent necessity for a unified struggle of the proletariat to prevent a Nazi victory…. No one else wrote with such prescience, precision and passion on the German events and their world historic implications.”

North then described the influence Trotsky’s writings on fascism had on his own generation—those workers and students who were radicalised in the 1960s. “Trotsky’s writings made clear,” he said, “that the victory of fascism was not inevitable. Hitler’s rise to power could have been prevented…. Fascism, the most barbaric form of bourgeois rule, came to power as a result of the failure and betrayals of the political leadership of the working class.”

“In fact, Trotsky’s writings on Germany were only part of his extraordinary political heritage” North continued. Trotsky “has had to be defended against the lies and falsifications that continue unabated 70 years after his death precisely because he played such a central role in the history of the last century. All of the key events of the first four decades of the twentieth century are reflected in his life’s work.”

North also dealt with Trotsky’s role in the Russian Revolution and the importance of the Left Opposition, which he founded in opposition to Stalinism. “Nothing is more historically absurd and politically untenable than the claim that the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky was merely a subjective fight between two individuals over personal power,” North declared. “The struggle that erupted inside the Soviet Communist Party in the mid-1920s was between two irreconcilably opposed programmes—the nationalist pseudo-socialism of the Soviet bureaucracy led by Stalin versus the socialist internationalism of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky. The outcome of this struggle was to determine the fate of the socialist revolution in the twentieth century and, ultimately, that of the Soviet Union itself.”

Against this background, North dealt with the role of historical falsification, beginning with Stalin’s campaign against Trotsky in 1923 and culminating in the Moscow Show Trials held between August 1936 and March 1938, in which the main leaders of the Bolshevik Party were convicted on false charges and executed.

“The lies of the Soviet regime were not merely the product of Stalin’s pathological personality,” he said. “Rather, they were rooted in the material interests of the bureaucracy of which Stalin was the chief representative…. The Stalinist bureaucracy resorted to the most brazen and monstrous lies to cover up its betrayal of the principles of the October Revolution and to conceal the ever more glaring contradiction between the real goals of socialism and the bureaucracy’s defence of its own material interests as a privileged caste.”

Explaining why it was still necessary today to deal with lies about the historical role of Leon Trotsky, North said the campaign against Trotsky was based on two related factors of a historical and political nature. In regard to historical perspective, bourgeois politicians, academics and journalists responded to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 with the claim that the October Revolution of 1917 was doomed to failure from the outset. To this end, they downplayed Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism. On no account could Trotsky be presented as a viable alternative to Stalin.

With the intensification of the economic and social crisis of capitalism and the imperialist wars against Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries, a political factor was added—the fear that, as was the case in the 1960s, Trotsky’s writings could play an important role in radicalising a new generation of young people.

“The new age of pre-emptive war produced a new literary genre: the pre-emptive biography!” North said. Over a period of slightly more than five years, three such “pre-emptive biographies” of Trotsky appeared, written by Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service.

North dealt with some of the falsifications in these books. He described the confrontation with the Suhrkamp publishing house and took issue with the articles in support of Service published by the ultra-right Junge Freiheit as well as the Neue Zurich Zeitung and the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. He demonstrated that they defended Service—despite all of his errors, falsifications and violations of academic standards—solely on the basis of agreement with his ideological and political beliefs.

North concluded by noting that 20 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, capitalism is in profound crisis. “The defence of Trotsky’s legacy against historical falsification,” he said, “is an essential component of the political education of the working class and its preparation for the political demands of a new epoch of revolutionary struggle.”

A lively discussion followed North’s speech. A number of participants expressed gratitude for his contribution and expressed interest in maintaining contact with the PSG and ISSE.