“Of course, Trotsky was an alternative to Stalin”

An interview with Professor Mario Kessler on the Trotsky biography by Robert Service—Part one

By Wolfgang Weber
21 May 2012

This is the first part of a two-part interview with German historian Professor Mario Kessler on the 2009 biography of Leon Trotsky by Robert Service. The second part will be posted Tuesday, May 22.

Since its publication in English by Harvard University Press three years ago, the Trotsky biography by British professor Robert Service has been subjected to a devastating critique by historians. David North in 2010 published the book In Defense of Leon Trotsky (Mehrings), in which he pointed out numerous factual errors, omissions, distortions and falsifications of sources.

Fourteen historians, sociologists and political scientists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland shared this criticism and, in what was initially a private letter [1], wrote to the director of the German publishing house Suhrkamp Verlag raising grave reservations about its plan to bring out a German edition of Service’s book.

Despite these concerns and criticisms, Suhrkamp is intent on going ahead and has announced on its web site that publication is planned for July 2, 2012. On behalf of the World Socialist Web Site, Wolfgang Weber spoke with Professor Mario Kessler about this decision.

Professor Kessler is a co-signatory of the letter to the Suhrkamp publishing house. Since the beginning of his career as a historian, his specialised area of research has been anti-Semitism and the labour movement. He studied in Jena and Leipzig, received his doctorate in 1982, and earned his post-doctoral qualification (Habilitation) in 1990 at the Academy of Sciences of what was then still East Germany (the German Democratic Republic—GDR).

Since 1996 he has worked at the Centre for Contemporary History (ZZF) in Potsdam, where he also teaches at the university. He has been a guest professor at Yeshiva University in New York, the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), Columbus State University (Georgia) and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has also been a research scholar at Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore), King’s College (London) and, most recently, Harvard University.

Mario Kessler has published over two dozen books in German and English on the history of anti-Semitism, the European labour movement, historiography, and exile communities. He is currently completing work on a biography of the German Communist leader and subsequent anti-communist Ruth Fischer. He is also co-editing a book dealing with the transformation and “liquidation” (Abwicklung) of historical scholarship in the GDR after German reunification in 1990. This book will be published in English.

WSWS: It is now more than nine months since you and a group of other historians sent what was initially a private letter to the head of the Suhrkamp publishing house, Ms. Ulla Unseld-Berkéwicz, in which you raised grave concerns about the planned German edition of the Trotsky biography written by Robert Service. So far, there has been no response to this letter by the publisher. Instead, Ulrich M. Schmid intervened in the international debate and in a feature article on February 21, 2012 in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung reported, based on information from Suhrkamp, that the publisher was intent on publication of a corrected version “without any far-reaching changes in the text,” despite the concerns raised by leading historians.

Schmid, a professor of Russian history and culture at the University of St. Gallen, welcomed this decision and dismissed the numerous factual errors and distortions in Service’s book as “small change” that would concern only nit-pickers and could easily be corrected in the course of translation. In his article, he does not even bother to address the charge of outright falsification of facts and sources.

Mario Kessler: I know and respect the director of Suhrkamp, Ulla Unseld-Berkéwicz, and was therefore amazed when I learned that the publishing house intended to go ahead with the production of a book which, after I had read it in 2010, I did not regard as a model of historical work. Up until then I had expected better from Robert Service. The fact that Ulrich Schmid, known to stand for certain standards of quality, is so strongly committed to the book is astonishing.

Enough has been said already about the many factual errors and examples of carelessness in the book; I naturally also took note of them. But whoever publishes books in the US (in England it is similar) knows that even large publishing houses such as Harvard University Press can no longer afford a proper editorial department. This, in the first place, has less to do with Trotsky than with the logic of the capitalist book market.

WSWS: The publication of the Service biography of Trotsky has, of course, served to discredit Harvard University Press. However, such an incredibly high number of errors is not to be found in other books put out by Harvard University Press and rather strongly points to a lack of competence on the part of the author himself.

MK: I would say this much: Robert Service cites numerous titles in the bibliography without making clear to the reader that he has not used them for his book. Had he actually made use of them, he would have been able to avoid a lot of mistakes and omissions, one would assume.

WSWS: According to press reports, at the launch of his book in London in 2009, Service publicly declared, “There’s life in the old guy Trotsky. If the ice pick didn’t finish him off, I hope my book does.” That is, achieve what the murderer of Trotsky failed to do in 1940—namely, destroy Trotsky as a figure in world history and a personage of immense political and moral authority.
It is this political aim of the book, rather than any new research findings or other scientific considerations, that prompts the reviewer Professor Ulrich Schmid to strongly support a German edition by Suhrkamp. In the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of March 6, 2012, Dr. Lorenz Jäger takes a similar position and even defends the thesis of the Oxford professor, according to which Stalin was a “more level-headed statesman” than Trotsky. “If ever Trotsky had been the paramount leader instead of Stalin,” Robert Service writes, “the risk of a bloodbath in Europe would have been drastically increased.”

MK: Putting Trotsky alongside Stalin to encourage the belief that Trotsky was just a frustrated mass murderer is not so new. This interpretation can also be found in the émigré literature of Mensheviks during the interwar period. Its authors were unable to reconcile themselves to the fact that they had been defeated by Trotsky in the Civil War and now, in exile, were forced to stomach his interpretation of revolutionary history. Previous generations of historians might have exercised a generous indulgence towards those authors. This cannot be accepted, however, with regard to contemporary historians. Here another standard must be applied to critics. According to Service, Trotsky was quite simply no alternative to Stalin. But this contradicts the historical facts and the findings amassed in the course of three-quarters of a century of research.

Of course, Trotsky was an alternative to Stalin, although he was not, if you permit me the irony, a “flawless democrat,” as Vladimir Putin was once described by the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Naturally, Trotsky resorted to force when it came to the very existence of the young Soviet Republic—a fact Service and Schmid deplore. But how could the Bolsheviks do otherwise? The alternative, we should never forget, was not a bourgeois democratic state, but rather the white counterrevolution, i.e., the Black Hundreds in a much more extreme form—intent on wiping out not only Marxism, but especially the Jews. They proved this during the civil war, when they carried out the bloodiest pogroms prior to Auschwitz.

Without putting Trotsky on a pedestal, in my opinion there was a significant difference between him and Stalin and his ilk. For the Stalinists, the construct of an overarching conspiracy was the constitutive feature of their politics, while none of their Communist opponents regarded the main enemy as coming from their own ranks. This does not reveal anything about the relationship between the Communists and democracy, although Trotsky went through his own learning process in this respect—an analysis of which is also missing in Service’s account.

Who else, also amongst the bourgeois opponents of Hitler, was able to follow the rise of the dictator with such profound analyses and warnings? Who else among the Communists (apart from the Communist Party Stalinists, the construct of an overarching conspiracy was the constitutive feature of their politics, while none of their Communist opponents regarded the main enemy as coming from their own ranks. This does not reveal anything about the relationship between the Communists and democracy, although Trotsky went through his own learning process in this respect—an analysis of which is also missing in Service’s account.

Who else, also amongst the bourgeois opponents of Hitler, was able to follow the rise of the dictator with such profound analyses and warnings? Who else among the Communists (apart from the Communist Party Opposition and the Leninbund, which should also be mentioned) vigorously defended the democratic rights and institutions of the Weimar Republic despite all criticism of its class character? Who else but Trotsky foresaw in 1938 that Hitler’s program would lead to the Holocaust? In a letter to American comrades dated November 22, 1938, he wrote: “It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the physical extermination of the Jews.” [2] Is it possible to read this without emotion? Does this quote not deserve a place in Service’s book?

Beyond that, in a very short chapter on “Trotsky and the Jews,” Service manages to suppress or distort an incredible number of things that are essential to a truthful presentation of the topic, i.e., Trotsky’s analysis of Russian and Romanian anti-Semitism based on the examples of the Bellis trial and the persecution of the Jews in the context of the Balkan Wars. Trotsky’s masterful portrayal of the Black Hundreds in the Russian Revolution of 1905 (“The Tsar’s Men at Work,” Chapter 12 in his book 1905) [3] is missing, as is a detailed presentation of his observations on the anti-Semitism of the Nazi Party in the last years of the Weimar Republic. And much more could be mentioned. Instead, Robert Service falsely writes that Karl Kautsky was a Jew.

Sure enough, the young Trotsky made a mistake in his estimation of Zionism and the Jewish Workers’ Bund, which Service notes, but without sufficiently explaining the historical context. What was it about? On January 1, 1904, Trotsky wrote in Iskra that Theodor Herzl had recommended Uganda as a temporary home for the Jews. But while he could promise the Jews Uganda, he could not give it to them. This dispute, over whether Palestine or Uganda should become a Jewish homeland, in Trotsky’s opinion would lead to the division and ruination of the Zionist movement. For better or worse, he forecast, the Jewish nationalists would end up in the Jewish Workers’ Bund.

Trotsky was wrong in that. The Bund continued to be a firm critic of Zionism, also of leftist Labour Zionism. Already in 1905, members of the Bund warned of an impending potential conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, which could transform the Middle East into a war zone for decades to come—a prescient warning.

The leftist Zionist Marc Jablum and former Social Revolutionary Moshe Novomeisky, also at that time a Zionist, reported that Trotsky attended the 6th Zionist Congress in Basel in 1903 as a visiting journalist. [4] This was the last congress attended by Theodor Herzl. On the agenda was the issue, amongst others, of Palestine or East Africa. Herzl stressed that the “Uganda” solution was only a temporary arrangement and that the goal remained establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Nevertheless, almost all the Russian Zionists quit the congress. The exit of the Russian Zionists meant that Herzl had a majority of the remaining delegates, who voted for the dispatch of a committee to East Africa to explore possibilities for a Jewish settlement. As we know, nothing came of it. Trotsky’s assumption that Zionism would quickly exhaust itself turned out to be wrong, though at that time this seemed a quite realistic prospect.

It’s a shame, but no doubt significant, that none of these significant facts are addressed in Service’s biography of Trotsky. There is a series of investigations of the issue of Trotsky and the Jews by authors from very different political camps: Yechiel Harari, Baruch Knei-Paz, Joseph Nedava, Edmund Silbener and Enzo Traverso. Robert Service refers to Nedava and Knei-Paz in his bibliography, but their work is not evaluated.

It was only in his last years that Trotsky softened his opposition to Zionism, although, as with all forms of nationalism, he assessed it critically. At the end of the 1930s, he regarded Palestine, rocked at that time by civil war, as a death trap for the Jews, because British colonialism would treat Jews and Arabs as its pawns to be played off against one another at will. Such a view really does not testify to ignorance in relation to that burning problem.

Service mentions this fact, but only very briefly and only to make fun of Trotsky in the immediately following passage because Trotsky raised fears of a rise of anti-Semitism in the US which could wipe out equal rights for Jews, as was already the case in Nazi Germany. Instead of poking fun, Service could have mentioned the Ku Klux Klan, a veritable mass organization of American fascism, and the anti-immigrant and anti-Jewish societies that sprang up in the US like mushrooms at that time. Even if Trotsky’s worries were not confirmed by history, was it unreasonable to raise such dangers in light of the fact that no country—including the US—was prepared to welcome the Jews driven out of Germany, as David Wyman demonstrates in a series of studies?

As far as a critical but fair overall assessment of Leon Trotsky is concerned, I would recommend a concise, well-written biography of Trotsky by Joshua Rubenstein which has been published in English. It takes up Service with the necessary objectivity and serves to answer and refute a number of his assertions and presumptions. This biography does not scrimp on criticisms of Trotsky and is sometimes harsh in its...
judgements, but is never unfair or malicious. [5] It deserves much more attention than Service’s book and should be translated into German.

**WSWS:** One of the central allegations made by David North is the following: Even if he himself is not an anti-Semite, Service is accommodating the anti-Semitic prejudices of a certain clientele in numerous formulations and passages, including the reproduction of a Trotsky caricature by the fascist ideologue and Nazi Party co-founder Dietrich Eckart without indicating the source or distancing himself from it.

This charge is supported by the historians’ letter to the Suhrkamp publishing house, which lists a considerable number of such passages in the book and points to their “repugnant connotations.”

Ulrich M. Schmid in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and Lorenz Jäger in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* counter this allegation and state it is perfectly legitimate for a historian to reproduce the “moods of the people” of that time, even when it has to do with anti-Semitic sentiments and prejudice.

**MK:** The letter of the 14 historians, which I signed, included a number of characteristic quotations in this respect. I was struck less by blatant anti-Semitism—I also do not regard Robert Service as an anti-Semite—than by half-knowledge instead of real knowledge on the subject. How can he seriously claim: “As in the rest of Europe, Jews [in Tsarist Russia] could establish themselves in the professions and in the arts. Quite a number of the Russian Empire’s leading doctors and lawyers came from the Pale of Settlement.”?

If only this had been the case! The truth is that the careers of Jews were systematically blocked. They could for the most part only study abroad, and they faced considerable bureaucratic hurdles before they could establish a practice as a doctor or lawyer. It was the February Revolution that did away with this formal discrimination, but without preventing anti-Semitic agitation—all this is dealt with in Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* [5].

But what struck me, and I am not alone in this respect, is how Service quotes anti-Semitic attacks on Trotsky sometimes with downright pleasure…

**WSWS:** Strictly speaking, Service does not provide quotes, because he largely avoids specifically naming the authors of the cited anti-Semitic attacks or providing the precise circumstances or sources. In a rare example of when he does name the source of anti-Semitic prejudices against Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders—namely, the German delegation at the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk—his citations prove to be unfounded on closer inspection. Neither in the protocols, nor in the memoirs and letters of General Max Hoffmann or Foreign Minister Richard von Kuhlmann is there any evidence that the German delegates regarded the Bolsheviks as scum because they had so many Jews in their leadership, as Service maintains.

**MK:** I agree. Kuhlmann’s memoirs are particularly still worth reading, an important source. In any case, Service would have done well if, when he referred to anti-Semitic sentiments and attacks, he had named names and placed them in the appropriate historical context.

Specifically, in the Russian Civil War of 1918-21, anti-Bolshevism and anti-Semitism entered into such a brutal and unfortunately effective alliance that even opponents of the October Revolution amongst the Jews of the Russian Empire eventually joined the Bolsheviks, seeking protection from the White pogroms. This was the main reason, and not the careerist motives emphasized by Service, that many Jews became involved in the Bolshevik Party.

In order to understand this problem, Service could and should have made himself familiar with the People’s Commissars’ decree on combating anti-Semitism of July 27, 1918 [7] and its rigorous implementation. This would have been better than pondering about the “loud voices and sharp feathers” of the Jewish Bolsheviks. The readership has a right, after all, to learn about the complex historical context.

*To be continued.*

**Notes:**
1. Published November 23, 2011 on the World Socialist Web Site
7. Published in *Dekrety sovetskoy vlasti*, Bd. 3, Moscow, 1964, p. 93

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsows.org