

Lecture at Historians' Convention: In Defense of Leon Trotsky

By David North
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We publish here the text of a lecture given at the Historians' Convention at the University of Mainz in Germany by David North, national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. (See: "Meeting in defense of Leon Trotsky at German Historians Conference")

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the Historians' Convention at the University of Mainz, and I am especially pleased to share the platform this evening with Professor Mario Kessler, who, as a scholar of international stature, is no stranger to historical controversies. He has made a significant contribution to the study of the political pathology of anti-Semitism and the complex relationship between the development of the socialist workers' movement and the Jewish people. By virtue of his field of interest, Professor Kessler knows in advance that whatever he publishes will certainly offend somebody—including, at times, even his friends. This is a problem with which I can sympathize.

I wish also to express my gratitude to my comrades at Mehring Verlag, and especially Wolfgang Weber, for all they have done to bring my book, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, to the attention of such a wide audience in Germany. A second edition of this book is now in preparation. This is something of a new experience for me. Over many decades in the socialist movement, I have become somewhat accustomed to waiting quite a few years for the size of the readership for my books and pamphlets to catch up with the initial press run. With *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, and especially its German edition, I have not had to wait all that long.

There is a well known saying, *Habent sua fata libelli*—"Books have their destinies." Actually, as I recently learned upon consulting the contemporary world's incomparable source of information, Wikipedia, this phrase is a shortened and simplified version of the more profound statement, attributed to the ancient grammarian Terentianus Maurus. He wrote: "*Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*" (literally, "According to the capabilities of the reader, books have their destiny") [1]

In other words, the reader is an active agent in the shaping of a book's destiny. It is through its readers that a book makes its way in the world.

Fortunately, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* attracted the attention of a number of highly principled scholars. Professor Bertrand Patenaude wrote the joint review of my book and Robert Service's biography of Trotsky, published in June 2011 in the *American Historical Review*, which attracted so much attention. His review was followed by the Open Letter to Surkamp that was signed by Professors Herman Weber, Mario Kessler, Helmut Dahmer, Bernhard Bayerlein, Heiko Haumann, Wladyslaw Hedeler, Andrea Hurton, Hartmut Mehringer, Oskar Negt, Hanz Schafranek, Oliver Rathkolb, Peter Steinbach, Reiner Tosstorff and Rolf Wörsdörfer.

It is likely that there exists between me and the signatories, and among the signatories themselves, divergent views on the causes of the Russian Revolution, the social basis of the Bolshevik-led insurrection of October 1917, the nature of the Soviet regime, and the political conceptions and historical role of Leon Trotsky. A biography of Leon Trotsky written by

Professor Kessler would, I am quite sure, be a very different work than one that I would produce. How could that not be the case? Our efforts would reflect our different viewpoints, different interests, and different experiences—in short, our different lives. But we would both be working from a real historical record.

All genuine history is a reconstruction of an objective process. The interpretative process strives to clarify, not distort, history. Trotsky was a real participant in an objective social and historical process. His actions and ideas are recorded in a massive archival record. There are documents from innumerable and varied sources. It is hard to think of another man who provoked such utterly divergent reactions. There exist the recollections and testimonials of those who followed Trotsky; there exist the denunciations of those who hated him. Trotsky was among the most prolific writers of his time. Not even the largest archival collection—that which is housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard—contains all his written work. A significant portion of his writings remains unpublished. Trotsky's ideas—as they found expression in his many books, essays, newspaper articles and even transcripts of discussions—have exerted immense and enduring influence on the political and intellectual life of countless countries.

The historian who undertakes the gigantic task of writing a biography of a historical figure of Trotsky's magnitude must be prepared to immerse himself in the archival record. He or she must be prepared to devote the years and even decades—not a few months—necessary to acquire the appropriate level of understanding of the man and the times in which he lived.

The point I am trying to make is that the historian is obligated, by the nature of his discipline, to immerse himself in a vast objective record. Every biographer has, of course, a "standpoint." But he should not see it as his task to lecture, harangue and denounce his subject for pursuing aims, holding views and living in times different than his own. If a politically conservative historian undertakes to write about a Russian Communist, he must still attempt to understand the historical and social context which shaped the ideas and determined the actions of his subject. The historian has, and, indeed, must have, ideas of his own. If he did not, he could not produce an interesting work. However, he must grapple with the ideas of his subject and be prepared to accept their legitimacy, at least in the sense of understanding the historical circumstances and conditions of which they were an expression. To borrow a phrase from the historian R.G. Collingwood, as recalled by E.H. Carr, "the historian must re-enact in thought what has gone on in the mind of his dramatis personae..." [2]

It should not be necessary to add that the historian must exhibit an absolutely unyielding honesty in his treatment of the archival record and all that falls under the broad category of what is generally termed the "facts." Of course, despite the popularity of the phrase, no historian has ever "read everything that can be read" on any substantial subject. But he or she will make a good faith effort to locate and examine all that is necessary to achieve a multi-faceted reconstruction of the historical

subject. The selection of facts must not be arbitrary and tendentious, and their presentation must be accurate. Nothing is so irreparably damaging to the reputation of a historian and the credibility of his work than the discovery that he has gotten his facts wrong, that the claims and assertions of a historian are not supported by the documents he cites, or that he has, in one way or another, falsified the historical record to fit preconceived needs of a predetermined narrative.

It has been irrefutably established over the past three years, since I wrote my first analysis of Service's biography, that his work is a travesty of historical writing. His book is, as the letter of the fourteen historians so precisely stated, a "defamatory lampoon." Even though I substantially expanded my critique in the course of additional lectures, including two in Berlin and one in Leipzig, I could not fully catalog the errors, falsifications and misrepresentations that Service somehow managed to pack into a single volume. The pattern of dishonesty is so deeply woven into the fabric of Service's narrative that he apparently felt compelled to misrepresent historical documents even when there was no apparent reason for doing so.

For example, as I was preparing my remarks for today's meeting, I once again looked through the Service biography. I selected a chapter at random, knowing that I was likely to find at least one error on whatever page I looked. I turned to Chapter 14, entitled "War on War." It deals with the impact of the outbreak of World War I on Trotsky's life. On page 137, Service describes an encounter between Trotsky and the German social democrat Hermann Molkenbuhr on a Zurich street, in which the latter predicted a speedy end to the conflict. Immediately following the quoted words of Molkenbuhr, Service adds the following sentence: "Molkenbuhr regarded Trotsky's apocalyptic prognosis as the ranting of a 'utopian.'" [3]

The entire account is taken from Trotsky's *My Life*, and Service includes a footnoted reference.

Upon turning to referenced passage, we find that Service did manage to reproduce correctly Molkenbuhr's words, as recalled by Trotsky. But the subsequent passage—"Molkenbuhr regarded Trotsky's apocalyptic prognosis as the ranting of a 'utopian'"—significantly alters Trotsky's account. Nowhere does Trotsky state that Molkenbuhr "regarded Trotsky's apocalyptic prognosis as the ranting of a 'utopian.'" He tells the story quite differently. Following the quote from Molkenbuhr, Trotsky writes:

Molkenbuhr was stating, of course, not his own estimate of the situation; he was simply expressing the official opinion of the Social Democracy. At the same time, the French ambassador to St. Petersburg wagered Buchanan five pounds sterling that the war would be over before Christmas. *No, we 'utopians' foresaw things a little better than these realistic gentlemen from the Social Democracy and the diplomatic circles.* [Italics added] [4]

Service's account creates a very different image in the mind of the reader than that which emerges from what Trotsky actually wrote. In the former, the reader is presented with an imagined scene in which the aged Social Democratic leader observes before him a "ranting" Trotsky, spouting apocalyptic phrases. Trotsky is reduced to a political caricature. But in the original text, Trotsky does not say anything about his immediate reply to Molkenbuhr. Rather, Trotsky adopts an ironic tone in recalling the wildly misguided political calculations of the opportunists and diplomats. Who, he is asking the reader, were the "utopians"? The revolutionists who foresaw the catastrophic implications of war or the so-called "realists" who believed all would be restored to normal within a few months? Service not only distorts the historical scene, he misses the

political point of the entire passage.

Just a few paragraphs later, Service writes: "For the first time in his [Trotsky's] career he entered into polemics with Plekhanov, whom he now regarded with utter contempt." [5] The sentence is footnoted. Service informs us that he is citing a letter from Trotsky to the much older revolutionist, Pavel B. Axel'rod, dated December 22, 1914. It is part of the famous Nicolaevsky Collection that is housed at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, where Service did almost all his research for the biography. When I first read this passage, I was taken aback. While Trotsky certainly deplored Plekhanov's support of the war, it was surprising to read that Trotsky regarded the "father of Russian Marxism" with "utter contempt." After the Bolsheviks came to power, Trotsky affirmed in several moving essays his intense and enduring admiration of Plekhanov. So what did Trotsky actually write to Axel'rod in December 1914? Did Trotsky, in a private letter to an older comrade, give vent to an inner rage provoked by Plekhanov's political betrayal?

Trotsky's letter to Axel'rod consists of three brief paragraphs. Only the first paragraph makes any reference to Plekhanov. It reads:

Have you read Plekhanov's pamphlet? I have begun a series of articles about it. For the first time in my life I am polemicizing against Plekhanov. He is not as secure as he had seemed to me. [6]

Most readers, lacking access to the source material, would assume that Service has accurately interpreted the content of the letter that he is citing. But it would be a mistake to extend such credit to Service. There is nothing in the referenced paragraph that suggests that Trotsky's attitude toward Plekhanov had become one of "utter contempt." That sentiment, which would reflect on Trotsky's own character, is simply invented by Service. In reality, this short letter conveys a sense of regret and sorrow over Plekhanov's evolution, sentiments far more appealing in the circumstances than that suggested by Service.

Just two pages later, after reporting Trotsky's arrival in Paris during the spring of 1915, Service writes:

Both Trotsky and his wife were to claim that they lived frugally in Paris. There is no evidence for this. In 1914 he dispatched six substantial articles to *Kievskaya Mysl*. Such were their success that the newspaper continued to employ him throughout 1915-16; and since the French and the Russians were allies in the war he could rely on money being transferred quickly to his bank account in Paris. The Trotskys were not hard up in wartime France. [7]

Service implies that Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, lied about their conditions in Paris. "There is no evidence," he writes categorically, that the couple lived frugally in the midst of the war. How then did they live? Lavishly? Did they enjoy the comforts of an affluent middle-class life? The only information that Service provides about Trotsky's personal resources is 1) that he wrote six articles for the liberal newspaper *Kievskaya Mysl* in 1914; and 2) that Trotsky was still employed by the newspaper in 1915-16. Service offers no precise information about Trotsky's remuneration. Instead, Service claims, without supporting evidence, that Trotsky "could rely on money being transferred quickly to his bank account in Paris." What is the factual basis of Service's assumption that this was actually the case?

Unfortunately for Service, his self-assured claims about Trotsky's wealth and easy access to money are contradicted by the text of a letter that is referenced in a footnote just one page earlier. Trotsky wrote to

Axel'rod on December 11, 1915:

I have a favor to ask of you. On the 20th, Nat. Iv. Trotskaya has a large payment to the printshop. Somewhere at the consulate there is 200 rubles for us which simply cannot be found. I wrote to "Kievskaya Mysl" asking them to send money by telegraph. But I fear that the money will not be received in time. With your help could she not get a loan — for a maximum of 10-12 days? This would help her avoid unpleasanties. Where is Martov: in Zurich or has he already left? [8]

In this letter, Trotsky is asking Axel'rod for a loan. His wife owes a substantial amount of money to the printshop. Clearly, they are using their personal income to support political work. Contrary to Service's claim, transfers of money from Russia to France are not problem-free. The 200 rubles that Trotsky and his wife desperately need in order to "avoid unpleasanties" have gone missing in the consulate. Once again, Service has both misrepresented and withheld from his readers important pieces of information contained in the archives because they contradict his dishonestly constructed and tendentious narrative.

Is there anything that we actually know about the conditions of life that Trotsky and his wife endured during the decade they spent as political exiles in Western Europe following Trotsky's astonishing escape from Siberia in 1907? Trotsky provided this short description of his circumstances in Vienna, where he lived for seven years (1907-1914):

My earnings at the Kievskaya Mysl were quite enough for our modest living. But there were months when my work for the Pravda left me no time to write a single paying line. The crisis set in. My wife learned the road to the pawn-shops, and I had to resell to the booksellers books bought in more affluent days. There were times when our modest possessions were confiscated to pay the house rent. We had two babies and no nurse; our life was a double burden on my wife. But she still found time and energy to help me in revolutionary work. [9]

Trotsky's account is substantiated by the recollections of Russian revolutionary Moisseye Olgin, who included in the 1918 preface to an early collection of Trotsky's writings a description of the latter's life as an exile:

His house in Vienna was a poor man's house, poorer than that of an ordinary American workingman earning eighteen dollars a week. Trotzky [10] has been poor all his life. His three rooms in a Vienna working-class suburb contained less furniture than was necessary for comfort. His clothes were too cheap to make him appear "decent" in the eyes of a middle-class Viennese. When I visited his house, I found Mrs. Trotzky engaged in housework, while the two light-haired lovely boys were lending not inconsiderable assistance. The only thing that cheered the house were loads of books in every corner, and, perhaps, great though hidden hopes. [11]

I have drawn these examples of historical falsification from just four pages that I chose at random from Service's biography. I could find, without difficulty, dozens more. Some of these errors may appear, when viewed in isolation, relatively minor. But their cumulative effect, spread

over 500 pages of text, is to create a monstrous parody of the real historical personality. The reader is presented with a "Trotsky" drawn to the specifications of a contemporary anti-communist.

In a review posted on the web-edition of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, historian Ulrich Schmid, who praises Service's work, argues that the factual errors pertain only to minor details—he uses the term "Monita"—which do not significantly detract from the overall value of the work. He justifies this position with the following declaration: "Neither North nor Patenaude have brought forward arguments that detract from Service's fundamental criticism of Trotsky's revolutionary fanaticism and his willingness to use violence. Trotsky directed the Red Terror in 1918 with an iron fist and ordered the bloody suppression of the Kronstadt sailors' uprising in 1921." [12]

Schmid is arguing not as a historian but as a petty-bourgeois moralist. His position is, in effect, that the exposure of Service's factual errors and fabrications do not detract from his condemnation of Trotsky on ethical grounds. The obvious reply to this sort of tendentious argument is that Service should have simply written a pamphlet entitled, "Why I Hate Trotsky," and marketed this work not as a historical biography, but rather as a statement of his own personal ethical, political and, perhaps, religious convictions. Ulrich Schmid fails to explain why Trotsky's support for the Red Terror in 1918 (which began after the assassination of Bolshevik leaders and the nearly successful attempt on Lenin's life) and the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising absolve Service of the responsibility to deal scrupulously with the historical record, and, moreover, make some attempt to understand and explain the historical circumstances and political pressures that shaped the actions of Trotsky and the Bolshevik regime.

A serious historian is not indifferent to moral issues. But if a moral condemnation is in order, it should emerge with compelling force out of the logic of the narrative itself. The historian should not feel the need to conceal or falsify the historical record in order to make his "moral" point. A genuine historian like Ian Kershaw does not need to wag his finger at Hitler and remind his reader again and again how awful he was. Hitler's criminality and the horror of the regime he led emerge out of the historian's narrative. Kershaw's command of the archival record and a vast body of secondary literature is never in doubt. Moreover, as a historian, Kershaw is interested in Hitler not simply as an individual. He seeks to understand and explain how such a man could rise to power and become the subject of mass adulation.

Of course, Kershaw's choice of a subject simplified, in a certain sense, the moral issue. An honest and scrupulous treatment of the historical record leads inexorably to the conclusion that Hitler led a criminal regime. Those who seek to justify the regime, like the notorious David Irving, are the ones who must distort, falsify and lie.

Herein lay the source of the problem for Service. He could not extract from the historical record the materials he needed to sustain his efforts to portray Trotsky as an odious and even criminal political figure. Thus, to achieve his aim, he had to resort, as Stalin did in the 1930s, to fabrications, half-truths and outright lies.

In a candid moment, Service declared that he hoped that he had successfully completed what the assassin had failed to accomplish: the destruction of Trotsky's reputation. But this effort has failed completely. The only reputation that has been completely destroyed by Service's biography is that of its author.

Footnotes:

[1] See, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habent_sua_fata_libelli [back]

[2] *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 23 [back]

[3] Service, *Trotsky*, p. 137 [back]

[4] *My Life* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), pp. 237-38 [back]

[5] Service, *op cit.*, p. 138 [back]

[6] Translated by Frederick S. Choate [back]

[7] Service, op. cit., pp. 140-41 [back]

[8] Translated by Frederick S. Choate [back]

[9] *My Life*, p.232 [back]

[10] The English transliteration of Trotsky's name with a "z" was common in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. [back]

[11] See, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch01.htm [back]

[12] "Streit um Trotzki," February 21, 2012 [back]

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