

The twentieth century was lived in vain: Leonardo Padura's *The Man Who Loved Dogs*

By Sandy English
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Leonardo Padura, The Man Who Loved Dogs, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014, translated by Anna Kushner, 576 pages.

The Cuban writer Leonardo Padura has written a lengthy and complex novel about the last years of both the Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky and Ramon Mercader, the Stalinist agent who murdered him in Mexico City in 1940. The novel was originally published in Spanish in 2009 and appeared in English last year.

Padura is one of the Cuban writers better known to an international audience. His detective novels about the slums of Havana and his would-be-writer/cop, Mario Conde, have been translated into dozens of languages, including English, where they appear as *Havana Black*, *Havana Blue*, *Havana Gold* and *Havana Red*.

Unlike many contemporary Cuban writers, Padura (born in Havana in 1955) lives in his native country and has so far successfully avoided the censorship and ostracism that the Castro government has imposed on many writers. He lectures and travels freely. *The Man Who Loved Dogs* opens in Cuba in 2004 and shifts back and forth in time between events in Mercader's life, those of a fictitious Cuban writer named Iván Cárdenas, who meets him in 1977, and the last 10 years of Trotsky's life. As with any novel that treats events in Trotsky's life, it necessarily takes place on the global stage, including Havana, Barcelona, Moscow and Mexico City.

The story begins with Iván, a writer who has stopped creating. He was reprimanded by the regime and sent into internal exile. After an initial book of short stories he has grown silent, in what is described as the stifling cultural atmosphere of Cuba. He now edits a veterinary magazine. The scenes of Cuban life are undoubtedly the most genuine and compelling in the book.

Iván initially has conversations on a beach near Havana with an older man, in ill health, named Jaime López. López has a minder or a bodyguard and simply talks to Iván about the borzoi Russian wolfhounds that accompany him. Iván finds López mysterious and even somewhat menacing. Soon, López intrigues Iván by telling him stories about Mercader. Iván, who knows nothing about Trotsky, eventually tracks down a copy of Isaac Deutscher's *The Prophet Armed* (1954), the first volume of his Trotsky biography.

The novel returns in time to 1936 to introduce Mercader, then a young member of the Spanish Communist Party in love with one of his comrades and fighting Franco in the Civil War. He is recruited into the Soviet secret police, the NKVD/GPU, by his

mother, Caridad. While little else is said about Mercader's background, Padura has clearly done an enormous amount of research, and the roles that Caridad and others play in Mercader's life seem plausible. The future assassin of Trotsky is then passed off to his handler, a GPU agent named, Kotov, based on the real-life Stalinist official, Leonid Eitingon.

Mercader is trained as a killer and assumes a false identity, which he tries with some difficulty to maintain over a period of years. He is held in reserve as a special agent, and is finally instructed to try and seduce the young Trotskyist Sylvia Ageloff, and insinuate himself into Trotsky's house in Coyoacan, Mexico.

Padura depicts Mercader intimately and even with some sympathy. It is not clear if the real Mercader had reservations or vacillations, or any sympathy whatsoever for his victims, but in *The Man Who Loved Dogs* he does. In one early scene, he is present when the GPU abducts the former Spanish Trotskyist Andrés Nin, and he knows with certainty that Nin will not talk, despite the horrible torture he is about to go through.

The assassination of Trotsky is vividly depicted. Trotsky, fighting back against his killer, lets out a scream that haunts Mercader to his dying day. The latter spends the next 20 years in a Mexican prison, never acknowledging his true identity or the organizers of the murder plot. Upon his release, Mercader lives briefly in Cuba, before moving to the USSR, and, ultimately, divides his time between Moscow and Havana (where he died in 1978). He encounters Eitingon again, who has spent years in prison, and whose talk is shot through with self-pity and cynicism. Mercader also realizes that he has not fought for a great ideal, although he never regrets what he has done.

The greatest and most fundamental weaknesses of *The Man Who Loved Dogs* emerge in its portrayal of Trotsky. The somewhat sympathetic depiction of Mercader is designed to create an obscene symmetry between the revolutionary and the man who murdered him. The novel paints a superficially admiring picture of the exiled leader, but Padura's overarching theme is the reactionary and now conventionally accepted lie that the Russian revolution was little more than a utopian scheme that was bound to fail. As the writer told one interviewer, the murder of Trotsky "meant to me the end of the big utopia of the 20th century and this was the sense in which I tried to write the novel."

In spite of meticulous research into the basic facts of Trotsky's life, *The Man Who Loved Dogs* is guided by a thorough misreading of Trotsky and his times. This leads to numerous

falsehoods and implausibilities. A largely imaginary Trotsky is depicted, a disappointed man of some moral strength, but with little vision of or hope in the future. The powerful, insightful analysis of the world situation and the confidence in coming revolutionary struggles that flowed from Trotsky's mind and his pen until the day he died are nowhere present in the book. Of course, agreement with Trotsky's views is not a necessary precondition for tackling this subject. However, Padura's falsification of Trotsky turns his story into more of an expression of the novelist's own gloominess than an accurate representation of Trotsky and his assassin.

Padura is concerned above all with the supposed similarities between the lives of Mercader, Iván, and Trotsky. As a *New York Times* reviewer pointed out, "Each of the three figures, his three main characters, though playing very different roles, end up victims of the machinations of a system that discards them when they stop being useful."

The author takes a wrong turn nearly everywhere in his depiction of Trotsky's internal thought. This is based on ignoring the written record, comprising dozens of volumes and tens of thousands of pages, in which Trotsky spelled out his ideas for posterity.

For example, Padura portrays Trotsky as having second thoughts about the defense of his political record that he made in his autobiography, *My Life*, because it "seemed futile in the middle of a torrent of adversities." And that "above all, he reproached himself with not having the courage to recognize...the excess that he himself had committed in order to defend the revolution and its permanence."

Then follows a litany, dishonestly attributed to Trotsky himself, of the usual accusations: that Trotsky attacked Soviet democracy, that he crushed the 1921 Kronstadt rebellion, and so forth. Trotsky himself answered these charges leveled by anticommunists and demoralized ex-Marxists on innumerable occasions. Padura tries to anticipate criticism by suggesting that Trotsky, while discouraged ("the pessimism that was beginning to defeat him"), would "never publicly admit it."

This "historical cynicism" is only reinforced by Iván's fate. Padura traces his history over the next 20 years, when he loses track of López. He eventually receives a manuscript of López's—delivered by his former bodyguard—that confirms his suspicions that the individual was none other than Mercader himself.

The novel passes through the hungry years in Cuba of the 1990s. By 2004, Iván tells a friend that meeting Mercader has ruined his life, and he reveals that he has written a book about him, which he bequeaths to the friend. Iván dies, a dispirited man. His existence as a writer within the Castro regime's system of official falsification has left him with an inability to truly understand who or what Mercader was. This has a broader significance for Cuban intellectual life. As Padura has remarked, "The character of Iván—Iván is not a man; Iván is the synthesis of a generation, in which I put many of the illusions, disillusion, defeats and fears of my generation." The novel ends on a bitter note.

Innumerable subjects are worthy of artistic treatment, but one still has the right to ask why a writer has made this or that choice

in his or her subject matter and what the significance of that choice may be. Why, for example, has Padura lavished so much attention on the feelings, thoughts and vacillations of Ramon Mercader? It is not only that Mercader's significance is exaggerated, but that Trotsky is lowered to the level of an unconscious cog in history.

Iván's friend, who may stand in for the author to some extent, articulates this worldview at the end of the novel: "Iván's character functions as the prosaic result of a historical defeat...like all the tragic creatures whose fates were decreed by forces greater than they were that overwhelmed them and manipulated them until they were turned into shit. This has been our collective destiny and to hell with Trotsky and his obstinate fanaticism."

Padura has said that he believes that a socially equal society is still possible. "I believe the new utopia needs to rediscover the basis of the system with the real components that this kind of society needs: real democracy, real power to the people that work, not for the bureaucracy as was the case in the Soviet Union and in many socialist countries."

It is telling that Padura, notwithstanding what he terms his hopes for social equality, sees the latter as a utopian goal. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was not rooted in fantastic dreams or desires, but emerged as the most profound and far-reaching response of the international working class to the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalism, the same contradictions that had produced the slaughterhouse of World War I. Padura, shaped by the radical nationalism and anti-Marxism that remain the hallmark of Castroism and the Cuban Revolution, rejects or is ignorant of these issues. *The Man Who Loved Dogs* is a work of historical fiction, not a political document or polemic. But, like every work of art, it can only be genuinely understood in relation to historical and social developments outside it. Padura's novel has been written and published at a time when war and revolutionary mass movements, the world-historical conditions most closely identified with Leon Trotsky, are once more on the horizon.

The false manner in which Trotsky's ideas and his struggle against Stalinism are represented in this novel, and the focus on a GPU killer whose only claim to immortality is that he carried out the most consequential political murder of the twentieth century, are hurdles that Padura's talents cannot overcome.

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