

REVIEWS

Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography*

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2010 marks a significant anniversary that will no doubt be ignored by the mainstream media and press. 70 years ago, one of the world's most famous revolutionaries was murdered by an agent of Stalin, in his home, in Mexico. At the time of his death, Trotsky was at the centre of a tiny band of revolutionaries, struggling to maintain the flame of Marxism against the rising tide of war, fascism and Stalinist degradation. Despite Stalinist attempts to sully his name and the relative isolation he endured because of his forced exile, Trotsky's stature stood tall. Leon Trotsky's life, whilst in no way faultless, is one of extraordinary achievement within extraordinary times, fuelled by a man of great talent and immense principle. Robert Service's new biography of Trotsky deserves serious attention, if only because the author is seen as an authority on Russian history and will therefore garner significant interest and readership.

Who was Trotsky?

Born Lev Davidovich Bronstein, in 1879, Trotsky was the fifth child to David and Anna Bronstein, a non-practising Jewish family, from Yanovka, Russia. By 1896, the young Trotsky had become a revolutionary, eventually gravitating to the theory and practice of Marxism to which he was to dedicate his life to until his death. He was an outstanding writer and orator and would first rise to prominence as the leader of the 1905 revolution against the tsarist regime in Russia. As a theorist, he developed the theory of Permanent Revolution, which argued that revolution could indeed come to a backward country like Russia, if led by the working class. He became an internationally renowned revolutionary and was one of the few Socialists to oppose the First World War as others succumbed to jingoism and nationalism.

He was not just a participant but an active leader and organiser during the Russian October Revolution, a feat he would match and possibly surpass as a leader of the Red Army during the Russian Civil war. He outlived the other outstanding leader of the Revolution, Lenin, and fought a courageous and principled fight to defend the Revolution from its growing internal bureaucratisation centred around and symbolised by Stalin. This fight would lead to his banishment from the USSR in 1929. However he would continue to make an outstanding contribution in these years of exile. He contributed to the re-emergence of a genuine socialist movement worldwide as countless Marxists fell in line with Moscow diktat and the cult of Stalin. He warned of the rise of fascism whilst others ignored or, indeed, quietly supported the grotesque and destructive movement.

Service the Historian

Robert Service claims his book is “the first full-length biography of Trotsky written by someone outside Russia who is not a Trotskyist”. This is a peculiar statement, not just because it is untrue, but because Service must know this himself. There have been several studies of Trotsky, several of which were authored by those hostile to Trotsky and his ideas. But Service doesn’t just want to write books, he wants to sell them, and for that he needs an apparently new angle. There is no doubt Service approached this work with a closed mind and with the lucrative goal of exposing “the real” Trotsky. There is another motivation behind Service’s attempted destruction of Trotsky, his politics. Robert Service is an ardent critic of both socialism and the Russian Revolution. It clearly irks him that Trotsky is still viewed in a much more favourable light than Stalin. In an interview in the London Evening Standard he proudly proclaims, “There’s life in the old boy Trotsky yet - but if the ice pick didn’t quite do its job killing him off, I hope I’ve managed it.”¹

Service wants to vilify Trotsky in order to vilify the ideas which have lived on after his death. This is no surprise. Service is a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institute, a well-known conservative think tank, whose mission statement proclaims it to be in defence of “private enterprise” and against “government intrusion into the lives of individuals”². Elsewhere Service has defended the idea of the free market. “With a centralized state-run economy,” he argued, “you couldn’t . . . get the kind of results that you wanted for popular consumption such as you can have under a market economy.”³ Service’s intellectual stock is based on his ability to act as the conservative intelligentsia’s prize-fighter in the field of Russian history, crushing anything they deem contrary to their interests and outlook.

Service has written widely on Russia and this is his third in a trilogy of biographies on Bolshevik leaders, Lenin, Stalin and now Trotsky. Stylistically, he is a competent writer. However his books lack the excitement of his counterpart Simon Sebag-Montefiore, and his books read more like trashy novels than balanced pieces of history. Service often fails to translate the excitement of the events he analyses. If you have ever wondered how boring a revolution could be then read Robert Service. In saying this, his narrative is clear, lucid and easy to follow.

It is not just the political errors and crass generalisations that weaken Service’s book, but the blatant factual errors he makes as well. For a book which is claimed will “become the authoritative biography” of Trotsky, it may well need a corrective reprint, otherwise it will doom a generation of students to making the same mistakes Service makes. Service gets things as elementary as the date of the death of Trotsky’s partner Natalia Sedova wrong. He writes that she “died in 1960, deeply mourned by her network of Mexican, French and American friends.” This is about 2 years off, Sedova

¹ <http://londonersdiary.standard.co.uk/2009/10/bonding-with-my-mirror.html>

² <http://www.hoover.org/about/mission>

³ <http://media.hoover.org/documents/uk-transcript-hitchens-service.pdf>

actually died in 1962.⁴ Service writes that in 1928 Trotsky was working on his critique of the programme of the Comintern's Fifth Congress. This is impossible, the fifth congress was in 1924. What Trotsky was working on was a critique of the sixth congress, as part of his opposition to the domination of the Stalinist clique in the party.⁵ Those with a keener eye will doubtless spot the other errors, but there is no doubt that Service's credentials are called into question here.

Trotsky the Individual

Service's main line of attack is not on Trotsky's politics, but on his personality. This bourgeois obsession with 'the individual' is nothing new. By supposedly revealing Trotsky's "true" inner-self, Service can debunk his politics and role in history. At his book launch he argued Trotsky "was Che before Che... but he was really ghastly to his children and would have wanted a European civil war in the 1920s".⁶ What Trotsky's relationship with his children ultimately has anything to do with his life as revolutionary, or how in any way this is comparable with his ideas on revolution in Europe is beyond comprehension.

But Service is clearly adept at this type of falsification. State Stalinist historians were once commissioned to write uncritical biographies of communist figures. These works would often paint their subjects in terms one might associate with a saint. There was never any idea of development. These individuals were communist from birth, destined to lead the movement to its foretold destiny, revolutionary to their core, revolutionary from birth. No doubt Service has disdain for these works, but the reality is that his book is their intellectual reversal, the intrinsic revolutionary simply replaced by the intrinsic dictator.

So what of Service's "fresh portrait"? He relies heavily on his unfavourable assessment of Trotsky's personality. If you were to meet Trotsky, he argued, you "did not have to wait long before discovering how vain and self-centred he was". He goes further. Trotsky was "an arrogant individual" whose "self-absorption was extreme". This is not the first time Trotsky has been described in such terms. Anatol Lunacharsky, who worked closely with Trotsky during the World War, and later became a Commissar in the Soviet Union, gave a revealing assessment of Trotsky in his 'Revolutionary Silhouettes'. "Trotsky as a man" he wrote, "is prickly and overbearing". He described Trotsky as having "colossal arrogance and an inability or unwillingness to show any human kindness or to be attentive to people". However Lunacharsky coupled this assessment by stating that he "always regarded Trotsky as a great man". In comparison to even Lenin "he is more brilliant, he is clearer, he is more active". Lunacharsky praised his "sweeping gestures, the powerful rhythm of his speech, his loud but never fatiguing voice, the remarkable coherence and literary skill of his phrasing, the richness of imagery, scalding irony, his

⁴ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/sedova-natalia/index.htm>

⁵ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/index.htm>

⁶ <http://londonersdiary.standard.co.uk/2009/10/bonding-with-my-mirror.html>

soaring pathos, his rigid logic, clear as polished steel”.⁷ Others who worked with Trotsky spoke of times he showed warmth and compassion.

However, for revolutionaries like Lunacharsky, Trotsky’s personality was a secondary question; his revolutionary credentials were in no doubt. But for Service, Trotsky’s personality is the litmus test for everything else. He derives his “fresh portrait” not from fresh research, but from an engrained desire to make his subject look bad. Throughout the book it is clear that Service deems himself judge and jury on issues of morality, parenting and marital relations. Trotsky is chastised for leaving his first wife, Aleksandra Sokolovskaya, in exile, while he went off to join the revolutionary movement in Europe. Service scorns him for apparently not paying enough attention to his children or their feelings. There is no doubt that Trotsky does not come close to Services supposed ideal father, but who can blame him. He was a revolutionary, who led an extremely stressful life, consumed by work day and night, with the threat of assassination looming over him at every turn. Did Trotsky do everything right by his children? No, but it is clear by any account that he reserved a deep love and compassion for them, as they did for him.

Incredibly, Service tries to blame Trotsky for the death his daughter Zina and his son Sedov. Apparently in Zina’s case, her life could have been saved by “a little dosing of parental consideration”. As for Sedov, Trotsky is guilty of not protecting him despite being thousands of miles away from where he was staying. Stalin is effectively admonished of any responsibility, despite his obvious role. These sections are undoubtedly the books lowest point and read like a man desperate to discover something new about Trotsky whilst trying to liven up its wretched account.

Trotsky and Democracy

Robert Service wants to portray Trotsky and by extension the entire Bolshevik project as anti-democratic. Service continues with the theme he outlined in his previous works that the Revolution was a coup. It, of course, was not, it was a revolution carried out with the overwhelming support of Russian workers. It is not just the content of the Revolution that Service distorts, but its context. In a debate with Christopher Hitchens, Service was forced to concede to Hitchens point that, “If Trotsky's Red Army had not won the Russian Civil War, then the word for fascism -- we have to face the fact -- was probably going to be the Russian word instead of an Italian word.”⁸ The blame for the terror and violence that occurred during the Russian civil war has to lay squarely with those foreign powers that not just made the white counter-revolution possible through supplies of weaponry and food, but physically supported them with garrisons of Troops.

Services account is marred by his own historical myopia. He looks at individual cases of Bolshevik violence during the Civil War, but individual cases don’t make for a rounded history. Service peddles the old lies about Trotsky and the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921.

⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lunachar/works/silhouet/trotsky.htm>

⁸ <http://media.hoover.org/documents/uk-transcript-hitchens-service.pdf>

This is how he describes it:

He told lies about the mutineers. He said that they were not the same naval personnel who had helped the Bolsheviks to power in 1917. He alleged that the mutinous sailors of 1921 were casual elements, conscripted at short notice and permanently embittered against socialism – and he accused them of being led by white army officers.”

The reality of the defeat of the Kronstadt rebellion is very different. Trotsky did not try to “hide” the story of Kronstadt as Service claims, but forcefully and brilliantly defended his actions. Evidence from the Soviet archives has supported Trotsky’s account and other non-Bolshevik sympathising historians have conceded this. The archives have shown that there was no support amongst Russian workers or the Red army for the sailors. Trotsky’s argument that the sailors of 1917 were not the sailors of 1921 is confirmed by evidence of clashes between the old revolutionary sailors and the new recruits who came from peasant and petit-bourgeois families. Not all of the ships joined the mutiny whilst others resisted. The supposed “lie” that the rebellion was sympathetic towards the counter revolutionary whites is supported by statements by the sailors themselves, which refer to “the men of the White guards that are leading the rebels”.⁹

The Rise of Stalin

Robert Service takes Trotsky to task for his assessment of the rise of Stalin. Trotsky and Stalin, Service writes, “shared more than they disagreed about”. Trotsky may not have been quite as bad as Stalin, but he shared his “lust for dictatorship and terror”. This is utter nonsense. As Trotsky himself argued, there was “not only a bloody line but a whole river of blood” between genuine Bolshevism and Stalinism. Of all the 21 members of the Central Committee at the time of the revolution, only two survived, Stalin and Aleksandra Kollontai. Stalin was not the natural continuation of the revolution, but its gravedigger.¹⁰

Services misplaced assessment is best typified by his approach to the global objectives of Bolshevism. Trotsky was an internationalist, irreconcilably opposed to the false theory of “Socialism in One Country”. Service downplays this, arguing that all Bolsheviks were for spreading the revolution. What he misunderstands is that the motivation and practice of the bureaucracy was different. They put their own material interests and eventually their collective imperial interests above the needs of the global working class movement. The communist parties that looked to Moscow were forced to adopt increasingly erratic perspectives, as the international interests of the USSR shifted and changed. In the cases of France, China, Britain and Germany, Trotsky was forced to watch on from the sideline whilst the Stalinist apparatchiks of the Comintern bundled workers movement after workers movement.

Service is however correct to argue that it was not simply a case of whether Stalin or

⁹ http://www.marxist.com/History-old/Trotsky_was_right.html

¹⁰ <http://www.marx.org/archive/cliff/works/1993/trotsky4/14-trials.html#p7>

Trotsky won the day. There were wider forces involved. Unfortunately Service ignores them himself. Instead he offers an intensely narrow account of Stalin's rise. "Trotsky did not go down to defeat at the hands of the bureaucracy, he lost to a man with a superior understanding of Soviet public life." He argues that it can be explained purely by Stalin's superior understanding of Russian life and Soviet apparatus. Russian history, viewed through the crooked mirror of Robert Service is once again reduced to a mere battle of wills and personalities.

Trotsky's vantage point, and probably his own hopes and desires, clouded his vision of the developments within Russia. He was trying to analyse the rise of a bureaucracy that he himself was a part of. Later writers such as Tony Cliff expanded and corrected Trotsky's view. The Soviet Union's isolation and destruction during the civil war had allowed a creeping counter-revolution to occur, any vestiges of Democracy were smashed and a new ruling class around Stalin emerged.¹¹ Despite its faults Trotsky's view was a lot more illuminating than anything Service offers.

Trotsky the Theorist

Service claims that Trotsky was not an "original theorist." He argues that Trotsky stole the idea of Permanent revolution from Alexander Parvus, a colourful character whose personal life Service would have a field day with. Whilst it is true Trotsky learnt a great deal from Parvus, and admitted this himself, his ideas were different in important ways. The theory of permanent revolution that Parvus expounded was a lot more cautious than Trotsky's. He believed there could be a "workers government" but only within the traditional parliamentary parameters of Capitalism. Trotsky believed that workers could overthrow capitalism in Russia, setting off a spark of revolution that would spread to more advanced countries.

Secondly, Service ignores how Trotsky's thought went through a process of development, and like all great Marxists this happened in vigorous interaction with real events and developments. Marx sharpened his theoretical understanding of revolution by the events of the Paris Commune and in the same vein so too did Trotsky after his involvement in the 1905 revolution. Further, it was not Parvus, or any other Marxist who confirmed the theory of Permanent Revolution for Trotsky, it was the events of 1917 which proved him correct.

Service has also attacked Trotsky's views on fascism. Trotsky was almost alone on the international left of truly understanding the threat of fascism. The position of Stalin and the German Communist Party can be summed up as 'after Hitler, communism'. Trotsky argued for all left parties and workers organizations to unite against fascism. The Stalinist KPD refused, disastrously declaring the SPD "social-fascist". The results were of course catastrophic, but for Service Trotsky was wrong because he only viewed fascism as "a puppet of finance capital". What Service wants to do is to admonish capitalism for any fault for the rise of fascism. This despite the fact that Hitler was invited into power

¹¹ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1955/statecap/index.htm>

by a fearful ruling elite, and by the work of historians such as Adam Tooze who have revealed the cosy links between the Nazi regime and German capitalism.

The Real of Trotsky

One of the few redeeming qualities of this book is that it often extensively quotes Trotsky. Despite Service selectively choosing which quotes to use in order to match his task, the real Trotsky sneaks his way in. One feels a little sorry for Service, as he attempts to duel with his dead subject, at a distinct advantage, but never the less coming out the worse. Trotsky's majestic style, coupled with the inspiring spirit of his ideas, jump from the pages, whilst the drudging dullard Service seems to just snarl from the sidelines. Character assassination will not kill Trotsky's ideas. Writing as the walls of Stalinism were collapsing in 1989, Tony Cliff summed this up. "The ideas of Trotsky can be very much like a stream. The stream disappears from sight and then reappears miles later. The stream hadn't dried up – it was just obscured from our sight below the surface."¹²

The world is constantly in a flux and whilst the world recession grows deeper, Trotsky's ideas are seeing a revival. This isn't because of how people view his personality, but because his revolutionary ideas make sense to people faced by the reality of Capitalist barbarism. Towards the end of the book, Service quotes from Trotsky's 'Testament', written just a few months before his death. However he omits the final paragraph, its radical sentiment and call to the future generations being too much for Robert Service, Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institute.

Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence, and enjoy it to the full.¹³

A vision we should all aspire to.

¹² <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1989/12/quake.htm>

¹³ <http://www.newyouth.com/content/view/169/68/>