

Review of Robert Service's Stalin. A Biography—Part Two

Harvard University Press, 2005, 715 pages

Fred Williams
3 June 2005

The following is the second part of a two-part article. Part one was posted Wednesday, June 2.

Service the psychologist

Service devotes considerable time to examining Stalin's psychological makeup. There are several aspects to his analysis which are very strange.

1) Service tries mightily to show that Stalin was not psychotic, even in his worst moments during the Great Terror. It may be true that Stalin was not psychotic, but does Service advance our understanding of Stalin by insisting that he was "only" subject to "a gross personality disorder"? In the space of a few pages in the chapter, "The Mind of Terror," Service offers the following statements: "Stalin did not suffer from a psychosis..." [p. 343]; "There was something very odd about him, as his close comrades sooner or later discerned: he was not fully in control of himself" [Ibid.]; "His capacity to turn on friends and subordinates and subject them to torture, forced labour and execution manifested a deeply disordered personality" [p. 344]; and "Stalin was as wicked a man as has ever lived. His was a mind that found terror on a grand scale deeply congenial" [p. 345].

One senses that, in grappling with Stalin's "deeply disordered personality," Service has slipped into religious categories [wicked], without even being conscious of the shift. And despite the confidence with which he dismisses the diagnosis of psychosis, Service later admits that "there abides an image ... [that] an administrative behemoth ran the USSR whose master was the pockmarked little psychopath. According to such imagery, Stalin was totalitarianism in human form" [p. 538].

2) Service raises an issue voiced by many historians: "What has always been intriguing is how an undemonstrative bureaucrat of the 1920s turned into a mass killer" [p. 337]. But in many places throughout the book, Service rebukes several figures (and Trotsky in particular) for not realizing already by 1918 or 1919 that Stalin was revealing the same degree of depravity he would later display in 1936-1938. This approach clashes most sharply with Trotsky's analysis of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party in the 1920s, during which Stalin emerged as the "outstanding mediocrity" and leading spokesman of the newly dominant social type, the party bureaucrat. As this social layer fought more ferociously to defend its privileged status, it resorted to more ruthless forms of struggle. Eventually, yesterday's comrades would be destroyed as "enemies of the people." In this process, the bureaucrats themselves, many of whom had been devoted revolutionaries, turned into savage instruments of Thermidorian reaction; they never would have envisioned

earlier in their lives the role they were now playing.

Service readily admits that Stalin was overly sensitive, that he never forgave an opponent, that he nursed a grudge until the opportunity for revenge presented itself, and that he was inordinately ruthless. But apparently he underwent no development. Thus, it was a straight line from Trotsky challenging Stalin over the publication of Zinoviev's letter on 19 October 1917 in *Rabochii Put'* to ... Trotsky's assassination in August 1940: "nobody knew how deeply he resented any shock to his self-esteem—and Trotsky in 1940 was to pay the ultimate personal price" [p. 143]. But a few pages later, Service contradicts himself. It turns out that Stalin's disagreement with Trotsky over Brest-Litovsk "was the first blow in a political contest which ended only in August 1940" [p. 160], when Mercader finally murdered Trotsky on Stalin's orders.

Both examples serve to undermine any conception that Stalin underwent a personal degeneration over a number of years. From a psychological standpoint, this rejection of a degenerative process is very odd, but it is explicitly stated as Service concludes his chapter on Stalin at the front:

"Stalin in the Civil war was an early version of the despot who instigated the Great Terror of 1937-38. It was only because all the other communist leaders applied the politics of violence after the October Revolution that his maladjusted personality did not fully stand out. But this is no excuse. No one acquainted with Stalin in 1918-1919 should have been surprised by his later 'development'" [p.174].

3) For some strange reason, Service is captivated by Stalin's "charm." As noted earlier, in the Preface, he calls Stalin "a family man and even a charmer." Similar statements are sprinkled almost casually throughout the text, but one of the most curious formulations is the following: "Beyond the public gaze Stalin was as complex an individual as ever. An accomplished dissembler, he could assume whatever mood he thought useful. He could charm a toad from a tree" [p. 453]. Why such a statement is allowed in a supposedly scholarly biography is beyond this reviewer's understanding.

4) Service apparently hopes to convince the reader of his "objectivity" by directing a torrent of epithets at Stalin. We learn that "Stalin was a bureaucrat, conspirator and killer and his politics were of a monstrous species" [p. 274]; "Stalin [was] the Soviet political counterpart of Al Capone" [p. 281]; "Like all bullies, Stalin acted out his fantasies. If ever any of these Soviet leaders was insincere in his behavior to his intimates, it was the Boss himself. His was the least straightforward personality of all of them.... At last his gross personality disorder was functioning without restraint" [p. 373]. Perhaps, after reading these negative statements about Stalin, the reader is supposed to be more inclined to accept Service's absurd claims about Stalin's charm, or the "austerity" and "restraint" of his "personality cult."

Service and intellectual history

Service is perhaps least equipped to deal with the significant intellectual issues that should be addressed in a biography of Stalin. The first glaring weakness is Service's ignorance of Marxism in general, and of the theoretical contributions of Plekhanov, Lenin, and Trotsky in particular. Marxism, let us recall, developed from the 1840s through the 1890s under the able guidance of Karl Marx (1818-83) and Friedrich Engels (1820-95). The "father of Russian Marxism" was Georgy Plekhanov (1856-1918). Lenin (1870-1924) assimilated and developed Marxism from the 1890s until his death in 1924. Trotsky's (1879-1940) development as a Marxist started just before the turn of the century, and continued until his assassination in 1940.

Each of the three Russian Marxists above made profound and original contributions to political theory. Plekhanov analyzed the populist movement which was widespread in Russia, and wrote unsurpassed essays on the materialist understanding of history, on philosophy, on literature and art, and on many other issues. His collected works of 24 volumes are far from complete, and he left a huge archival heritage that resides in St. Petersburg. In light of Service's efforts to write a new biography of Stalin, he would have benefited from reading and thinking about one of Plekhanov's most interesting essays: "The Role of the Individual in History." It appears that this essay is terra incognita for the Oxford don.

Lenin, too, made an incisive analysis of the populist movement in Russia, and his study of the development of capitalism in Russia is a classic work of economics. But his main strength came as an analyst of the theoretical issues related to the building of an international Marxist movement. His criticisms of opportunism in the Marxist movement are unsurpassed, and his critique of the collapse of the Second International as a revolutionary organization played a decisive role in reviving the shattered revolutionary movement during the First World War and preparing the October Revolution. Lenin's writings on imperialism are groundbreaking, and his *State and Revolution*, written in the summer of 1917, can be read with great interest today. The same can be said of *Materialism and Empiricocriticism*, despite Service's unwarranted contempt for that book. Lenin's works have appeared in five editions, although none is complete. The last, consisting of 55 volumes, contains deplorable falsifications and omissions.

When it comes to Trotsky's theoretical heritage, the matter is more complex. Nicknamed "The Pen" at an early age, Trotsky was the most prolific Marxist in history. For most of the period from 1903 to 1917, Trotsky stood outside the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, often spearheading attempts to bring the two factions together. In this effort he traded impassioned polemics with Lenin, and little invective was spared by either side. In 1917, Lenin and Trotsky agreed on all fundamental issues of revolutionary perspectives, and Trotsky formally entered the Bolshevik Party in August.

Through revolution, civil war, and the founding of the Communist International, the collaboration between Lenin and Trotsky was as close as the collaboration between two revolutionaries has ever been. By 1923, however, with Lenin increasingly removed from active political life due to his failing health, the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin began attacking Trotsky with an unexpected ferocity. From that point on, not only until Trotsky's assassination in 1940, but even beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Trotsky was the most vilified Marxist on the planet. Stalin and his satraps, including Yaroslavsky, Zaslavsky, Martynov, Vyshinsky, and countless others, authored thousands of articles and books appearing in press runs of millions to defame and discredit Trotsky and his writings.[13] Ultimately, and to Stalin's great chagrin, they failed.

Writing under unbelievably unfavorable conditions, hounded from

country to country over the last 12 years of his life, Trotsky produced masterpiece after masterpiece of political analysis. It was Trotsky who wrote the best material on the Thermidorian degeneration of the Bolshevik Party; it was he who exposed the bankruptcy of Stalin/Martynov's theory of the "bloc of four classes" which subordinated the Chinese CP to the Kuomintang and led to the defeat of the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27. It was Trotsky who denounced Stalin's "theory" that Social Democracy was Social Fascism. (Stalin's policy split the German workers' movement and let Hitler come to power.) It was Trotsky who exposed the equally bankrupt policy of Popular Frontism which led to the defeat of the Spanish Revolution[14] and paved the way to World War II.

None of these issues causes a ripple in Robert Service's consciousness, and the reader of his Stalin biography emerges blissfully unaware of the significance of the theoretical war to the death being fought out between the Stalin-dominated Comintern and Trotsky's supporters, who were being murdered both inside the Soviet Union and abroad.

But even Service cannot ignore one pivotal issue: the irreconcilability of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution with Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country." Here as well, Service is incredibly inept.

Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky each developed theories about the prospects for a socialist revolution in Russia, the correlation of class forces in such events, the relationship between struggles in Russia, Europe and Asia, and many other crucial issues. In his analysis of the revolutionary events of 1905, Trotsky, in collaboration with Lev Deutsch and Alexander Helphand (Parvus), developed the theory of permanent revolution. It was thoroughly internationalist in spirit, embodying a Marxist analysis of the world market, the world division of labor, and the relative weight of the proletariat on a world scale.

Given the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie and the concentration of the working class in the urban centers, Trotsky did not envision that a revolution in Russia would stop at a bourgeois democratic stage. It would, he explained, quite rapidly pass over into a socialist revolution.

Although Lenin advanced a somewhat different view of the prospects for revolution in Russia (calling for the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry), in 1917, especially with his April Theses, Lenin appeared to adopt most, if not all, of the central tenets of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Neither figure ever suggested that socialism could be built in backwards Russia alone; at best, the Russian socialist revolution would be the opening salvo in the world socialist revolution, which would be resolved mainly in the advanced capitalist countries and rapidly extended throughout the less developed (and at that point, largely colonized) world.

Service's treatment of these matters is deeply flawed. His first inclination is to dismiss them as another "tempest in a tea pot." He claims, incorrectly, that Stalin first introduced his theory of socialism in one country in 1926, when he published *On Questions of Leninism*. "Just one ingredient of the book held attention at the time: Stalin's claim that socialism could be constructed in a single country. Until then it had been the official Bolshevik party assumption that Russia could not do this on its own" [p. 244].

Service then makes the fantastic claim: "Such was the contempt in which his enemies held his writings that they did not deign to expose his unorthodoxy; and indeed it is only in retrospect that his heretical teaching came to have any practical significance" [p. 244].

It is well known that Stalin first openly advanced his theory of socialism in one country in the fall of 1924. He presented his theory in a preface to a volume of his writings on the October Revolution, dated December 17, 1924: "The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists." R.V. Daniels, whose work *Conscience of the Revolution* Service cites elsewhere in his book, lists this event quite clearly in his Chronology of Events, and discusses its implications in the text.

It is bad enough to misdate this milestone in the development of Stalin's

thought, but Service compounds the confusion by claiming that his enemies “did not deign to expose his unorthodoxy.” Trotsky alone wrote article after article in the next few years demolishing the orthodoxy of Stalin’s theory. Even Service must have read some of these works, such as the “Platform of the Opposition” (1927) or “The Critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern” (1928). But to further muddy the waters, Service writes that “[Stalin’s] controversial commitment to socialism in one country did not imply a basic disregard for the necessity of international revolution” [p. 262]. This ignorant statement leads us to the crux of Service’s book.

The actual aims of Service’s book

If this reviewer were to pick one passage which illustrates the goals of the Stalin biography, it would be: “Stalin the Leader was multifaceted. He was a mass killer with psychological obsessions. He thought and wrote as a Marxist” [p. 379].

Or, to be a bit more concrete: “Accused by Trotsky of betraying the October Revolution, he indeed distorted and eliminated much of Lenin’s legacy. But a Leninist of a sort he remained while introducing a personal dimension to his handling of international relations” [p. 382].

Indeed, Service never tires of assuring the reader that “[Stalin] and the rest of the Politburo were Marxist believers...” [p. 284]; “Stalin, moreover, was a socialist internationalist. As a Marxist...” [p. 324]; “Yet Stalin was no more likely to amputate Marxism-Leninism than to cut off his own fingers. What he was doing was more like shaving his beard; for the essential ideology was left largely intact” [??] [p. 329].

So the atrocious amalgam emerges: Stalin the nearly psychotic mass killer, but Stalin the Marxist. And if need be, Stalin the Leninist. If anyone who was seriously interested in Marxism picked up Service’s book, he or she would encounter only a deeply flawed and disorienting presentation of Marxism, the October Revolution, the biographies of Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky, and indeed, the history of most of the twentieth century.

Service on Stalin’s anti-Semitism

One issue that undermines Service’s insistence on “Stalin the Marxist” is the question of Stalin’s anti-Semitism. By the time he addresses the issue directly (and very late in his book, page 567), Service has provided several clues in passing that Stalin might indeed be anti-Semitic. Here are a few examples: “Stalin differed from Lenin inasmuch as he never—not even once—commented on the need to avoid anti-semitic impulses” [15] [p. 156]; “The Great Terror had removed hundreds of qualified personnel. Jews in particular were repressed” [p. 395]; “[In 1943], Alexander Fadeev, Chairman of the USSR Union of Writers, roundly condemned ‘rootless cosmopolitanism’... Stalin was already playing with one of the grubbiest instruments of rule: anti-semitism” [p. 447]; “As the harness of repression was imposed, Stalin strove to increase the degree of dependable compliance. He did this in line with his lurch into an anti-Jewish campaign in the USSR after he fell out with the Israeli government. Communist parties were constrained to select a Jew from among their midst, put him on show trial and execute him” [p. 518]; “But what was Stalin up to? Certainly he had it in for Jews from 1949, and his behaviour and discourse became ever cruder” [p. 519].

This is not to suggest that Service deals with this issue in any depth or with sophistication. Given the history of official tsarist anti-Semitism,

replete with pogroms, the Pale of Settlement, forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and hideous trials such as the Beilis affair, any hint of anti-Semitism in Stalin’s make-up should be plumbed to the depths. Service remains on the surface at best, and even then seems to confuse anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism, not a small issue when dealing with the nationality question, the Bund, and eventually Stalin’s attitude toward Israel.

Finally, on page 567, Service writes: “The aspect of Stalin’s thought that has captured the greatest attention, however, is his attitude to Jews. No irrefutable evidence of anti-semitism is available in his published works.” (!) He presents other arguments which deny or, at the very least, soft-pedal the possibility of Stalin’s anti-Semitism. Some of the arguments are so weak (“Yet Beria and Kaganovich, who was Jewish, absolved their master of anti-semitism” [p. 568]) that Service himself beats a hasty retreat moments later: (“Not that they were moral arbiters on anything”) [Ibid.]

Having noted that “some of his remarks to others in the early 1950s were vicious in the extreme about Soviet Jews” [p. 569], Service makes the odd concession: “Perhaps he turned into an anti-semite right at the end” [16] [Ibid.].

At this point, Service launches into an incredible series of statements: “Some see him as a Russian nationalist. For others the driving force of his ideas was anti-semitism. A further school of thought postulated that in so far as he had ideas they were those of a Realpolitiker.... And there are some—nowadays remarkably few—who describe him as a Marxist” [p. 569].

Need one be reminded that Service is one of the “remarkably few” who describe Stalin as a Marxist? Since Marxism and anti-Semitism are irreconcilably opposed to each other, Service cannot admit that Stalin was an anti-Semite and still cling to the assertion that he was also a Marxist.

Service could have turned to other sources for help on this question. Vadim Rogovin includes an insightful chapter, “The Anti-Semitic Subtext of the Moscow Trials,” in his 1937. *Stalin’s Year of Terror*. [17] Little wonder that Service never mentions Rogovin in this or any other context. He might, by the way, have consulted this volume for a deeper understanding of the Great Terror and the Moscow Trials. Service’s treatment of the Moscow Trials is scandalously inadequate; when reading about the Trial of the Sixteen (in which Zinoviev and Kamenev were the two most prominent defendants), one would hardly know from Service’s treatment that a major event was taking place. [18] But then, we shouldn’t expect too much. In summing up his true attitude toward the Great Terror, Service writes: “The fact that a multitude of people were wrongly arrested was neither here nor there” [p. 370]. And this passes for history...

Service the stylist

Compared to a condemnation of the historical content of the Stalin biography, a criticism of stylistic features might seem inconsequential. But a few things should be considered.

Service’s prose is usually quite readable. There are many irritating exceptions, however. Here we provide a sampling of various stylistic errors:

a) Poor analogies and metaphors

On page 357, he writes: “The Lenin cult glistened like a film of oil over the dark ocean of Soviet reality in the late 1930s.” [Please...]

In describing the Great Terror: “The tall poppies of the Soviet Union were being cut down” [p. 349. Inappropriate analogy, with more than a hint of schadenfreude].

A few pages later, Service says of Bukharin: “At the confrontation with

Kulikov in December 1936, Bukharin was like a butterfly seeing the needle about to pin him to a board” [p. 354. This is a sick analogy, showing a deplorable lack of compassion for the victims of Stalin’s crimes. In addition, Service doesn’t cite a source for his description; perhaps the analogy is a product of his own warped imagination.]

In describing Stalin’s ideological makeup: “State terrorism had already been installed as a permanent item in his mental furniture” [p. 158. This is a stupid analogy. Apparently Service sees political development as a process of ... *installing mental furniture*. Has he fallen victim to the ubiquitous makeover shows on British television?].

P. 149: “The psychological and intellectual scaffolding for Stalin’s proclivities was occluded from the public.” [How can “scaffolding” for “proclivities” be “occluded from the public”? Are there no editors?]

P. 81: “He had not joined the Marxist movement to bury his mind under the bushel of official policy.” [The reviewer is not sure how to classify this sentence.]

P. 479: “To many Russians it seemed that the oven of war had smelted the base metals out of him and produced a stainless Leader who deserved their trust and admiration.” [!!!] [This is a weak metaphor and even weaker pun, one that Service should have avoided: Stalin the stainless steel man.]

P. 491: “Stalin’s mind was a stopped clock. (?) There was no chance in 1945 that he would satisfy popular yearnings for reform. His assumptions about policy had hardened like stalactites.” [Mixed metaphors... and poor ones at that.]

Sometimes extended metaphors fail miserably:

“Sooner or later, Stalin, the most determined driver of the vehicle of terror, would again grasp the steering wheel and turn the key. The years from the end of 1932 through to late 1936 witnessed occasional ignition and abrupt forward movement. The machinery responded fitfully to Stalin’s guidance. When he turned the key the result was unpredictable. Sometimes the battery was flat and needed topping up. On other occasions the plugs were too damp and all he could achieve was a brief, sputtering sound. But in fact the vehicle was roadworthy; and when the circumstances were more favourable in 1937, the driver would be able to start and keep it running at full speed until he decided to bring it to a halt a year later” [p. 322].

Service ends Chapter 28 with these words. He must have been proud of them. At this point, however, no reader would be faulted for putting the book down without ever making it to Chapter 29.

b) Anglicisms

It was purportedly Churchill who said that Britain and America were two countries separated by a common language.[19] For the American reader (and the reviewer assumes Service wants to reach some American readers, not to mention those in Canada, India, Australia, and other English-speaking countries), Anglicisms should be avoided. As the editors of Harvard University Press certainly know, there are usually perfectly acceptable solutions which don’t offend readers on either side of the Atlantic. Why, then, does the text abound with such expressions as: “cocking a snook” [p. 74], “a right good thrashing straight in their gobs” [p. 112], “Stalin’s cack-handed instructions to the Chinese CP in 1927” [p. 262], “Bolshevik ‘conspiratorial’ schemes had been rumbled by the Stockholm police” [p. 61], or “This time there was no argy-bargy about the choice of venue” [p. 475]. Lastly, while not exactly an Anglicism [this particular form of backwardness exists outside the UK], one wonders why the Oxford don feels that it is appropriate to write: “[Stalin] chased skirt with enthusiasm” [p. 79].

Service’s “minor” errors

A few minor errors in a major work might be forgivable. But even minor errors can sometimes be immensely irritating. Service’s “minor” errors are not always obvious, and if the reader is not attentive, they might slip by unnoticed. Here are a few examples, followed by corrections:

a) Dates:

P. 95: “In 1908 Lenin published a work of epistemology, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.” [It was 1909.] Oddly, on page 270, Service refers to “*Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, that crude work on epistemology which Stalin had dismissed when it appeared in 1909.” He should make up his mind.

P. 217: “The Thirteenth Party Conference in December had arraigned this Left Opposition for disloyalty.” [The Thirteenth Party Conference was held January 16-18, 1924. Moreover, according to Medvedev, “Krupskaya tells us that on 19 and 20 January 1924 she read out to Lenin the resolutions of the Thirteenth Party Conference which had just been published, summing up the results of the debate with Trotsky. Listening to the resolutions—so harshly formulated and unjust in their conclusions—Lenin became intensely agitated... it was on the next day, and in a state of extreme distress, that Lenin died.” Roy A. Medvedev, *On Stalin and Stalinism*, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 32.]

P. 325: “... the centenary of Alexander Pushkin’s death was celebrated with pomp in 1939.” [Nonsense; it was celebrated in January 1937 and throughout the rest of the year; Pushkin died on 29 January (old style) in 1837. What is amazing is that the celebrations went ahead in the nightmarish atmosphere of the Great Terror, something Service doesn’t notice.]

P. 602: “... at least until the Non-Aggression Treaty of September 1939” [The Non-Aggression Treaty between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was signed on 23 August 1939, paving the way for Hitler’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.]

b) Names misspelled:

P. 133: Ivan Smilga [should be: *Ivar* Smilga; Smilga’s surviving daughter, Tatiana *Ivarovna* Smilga, would probably not be surprised that another careless historian has turned her father into Ivan.]

P. 144: Bubnovv [should be: Bubnov]

“Trotski”—Throughout the book, Service has rendered Trotsky as “Trotski.” There is no good reason for this rendering. The Russian ending of his name can be transliterated as ij, -ii, or -iy; these rules are often abandoned in favor of forms that have become commonly accepted. In the case of “Trotsky,” the simplified “y” ending is used almost universally in the English language. The list of historians, memoirists, bibliographers, editors and translators who use “Trotsky” is long: Isaac Deutscher, Louis Sinclair, H.G. Wells, Louise Bryant, James Bunyan & H.H. Fisher, William Chamberlain, Harold Shukman (curiously an emeritus professor at St. Antony’s College, Oxford University; did Service ignore his mentor’s advice?), R.V. Daniels, Robert C. Tucker, Alexander Rabinowitch, Stephen Cohen, Nekrich & Heller, Orlando Figes, David King, et al. The two publishers who have printed the majority of Trotsky’s works in English, New Park Publications and Pathfinder Press, use “Trotsky.” Even Wolfgang Lubitz, editor of an authoritative bibliography published by Saur Publishers in Munich, opted for “Trotsky,” despite the fact that the *German* rendering is usually “Trotski.” Why Service insists on “Trotski” is an unexplained oddity.

c) Incorrect titles of books and documents:

P. 301: “Trotsky had written *Art and Revolution*” [Wrong, he wrote *Literature and Revolution*, which Service admits is one of Trotsky’s finest works, even if he cannot reproduce the title].

Perhaps unbeknownst to Service, there is a difference between *zaiavlenie*, [the Russian word for “declaration” or “statement”], *pis’mo*, [the Russian word for “letter”], and *platforma*, [the Russian word for “platform”]. Service often mixes them up, mangling titles and translations that have long since been established by other, more reputable, historians.

On page 216, he refers to the “Platform of the 46.” It was not a platform; it was the “Declaration of the 46,” a letter sent to the Central Committee.

On page 248, Service writes: “In spring 1927 Trotsky drew up an ambitious ‘platform’ signed by 83 oppositionists.” Wrong in several respects. On May 25, the “Declaration of the 84” was submitted to the Politburo. Most historians explain the confusion between 83 and 84 signatories: Krupskaya signed the May 25 statement. When Stalin threatened her with reprisal, she removed her signature, fearing a split in the party. In September 1927, the “Platform of the Opposition” was submitted to the Politburo, in preparation for the XVth Party Congress. Service confuses this “Platform” with the “Declaration of the 84.” He should know better.

d) Wrong citations:

The following endnotes contain mistakes (with the first number designating the chapter, the second number designating the note number): 19.17; 22.12; 22.17; 28.28; 30.7; 51.2. There may be more, but the reviewer does not have access to many of the works to which the notes refer.

Some of these mistakes may be typographical errors, resulting in misspellings, incorrect page references, etc. These and others probably reflect the haste with which the book was written (one assumes that there was insufficient time to check endnotes carefully). But there is another category of error which is more serious: vague references which reveal unfamiliarity with the texts being cited or complete ignorance of the subject matter. Here is one example:

On page 339, Service writes: “The enthusiasm of Stalin’s associates for political repression stemmed from the traditions of Bolshevism. The discourse of the Soviet state had always been extremist in tone and content.... Terrorist methods had been approved and ‘theorized’ by Lenin and Trotsky.15” Endnote 15 on page 640 then dutifully provides a reference to support Service’s claim: “15. L. Trotsky, *Terrorizm i kommunizm*.” The implication is that Trotsky’s entire book, *Terrorism and Communism*, is a work written to “approve and ‘theorize’ terrorist methods.”

Apparently Service thinks that nobody has read Trotsky’s book. And it is odd that he refers only to the Russian edition of a work readily available in a good English translation, with a preface written by Trotsky on January 10, 1935 for the English-speaking reader. In that preface, Trotsky writes:

“For the sake of continuity I have kept the title for the book under which the first English edition came out: *The Defence of Terrorism*. But it must at once be said here that this title, which is that of the original publishers and not the author’s, is too wide and may even give grounds for misunderstanding. What we are concerned with is not at all the defence of ‘terrorism’ as such. Methods of compulsion and terrorization down to the physical extirpation of its opponents have up to now advantaged, and continue to advantage in an infinitely higher degree the cause of reaction, as represented by the outworn exploiting classes, than they do the cause of historical progress, as represented by the proletariat. The jury of moralists who condemn ‘terrorism’ of whatever kind have their gaze fixed really on the revolutionary deeds of the persecuted who are seeking to set themselves free.”[20]

Trotsky gives the example of Ramsay MacDonald, who had switched from the Labour Party to the Conservative:

“Today the pious enemy of terrorism is keeping up by the help of organized violence a ‘peaceful’ system of unemployment, colonial oppression, armed forces and preparation for fresh wars.

“The present work, therefore, is far away from any thought of defending terrorism in general. It champions the historical justification of the proletarian revolution. The root idea of the book is this: that history down to now has not thought out any other way of carrying mankind forward

than that of setting up always the revolutionary violence of the progressive class against the conservative violence of the outworn classes.”[21]

By a crude sleight of hand, Service has misappropriated Trotsky’s book, written in the midst of civil war in 1920 and directed at Kautsky, Renner and other leaders of the Second International, and tried to use its title to justify Stalin’s extermination of genuine revolutionaries during the Great Terror of 1936-38. This is a gross misuse of a citation.

One wonders why Service is so careless with such a loaded term. Individual terrorism, i.e., the assassination of tsarist officials, claimed about 12,000 lives in Russia during the 25 years leading up to 1917. This method of struggle was used most often by anarchists and Socialist-Revolutionaries. Social Democrats turned to terror rarely; indeed, a vigorous debate within Social Democracy resulted in resolutions being passed against terrorism. Terrorism was seen as detrimental to the Marxist movement. But in no way could these debates on terrorism in the early years of Bolshevism be equated with “the enthusiasm of Stalin’s associates for political repression.”

The example above is not the only time Service uses endnotes to cite an entire book, without specifying pages, chapters, or relevant sections: see 24.13; 25.28; 27.5; 27.7; 28.3; 28.15; 28.34. These are not instances where he is referencing the title of a book, but specific information within a book. Confidence in the author is undermined by this substandard practice.

Service’s book as a barometer of the crisis in academia

One must consider some of the broader implications of Service’s book. Clearly if this biography is accepted as a scholarly work, there is a profound crisis in academia. By this the reviewer is not suggesting that Service must adhere to a political viewpoint that he clearly rejects, e.g., Marxism. There are many non-Marxists, after all, who have written valuable historical works about Stalin. Academics, however, live not in a vacuum and are subject to the many ideological pressures that rage throughout society. In the mass media, in public discourse, in popular culture, an undeniable trend is easily discernable: the intellectual decay that set in under Thatcher and Reagan has assumed shocking forms under Blair and Bush. Service’s latest contribution is startling evidence of that decay in the academic world, which must be fought.

Conclusion

Robert Service has written a wretched biography of Stalin. He fails to challenge successfully the previous interpretations of Stalin’s life, particularly the analysis made by Trotsky, and makes little use of new archival material to deepen our understanding of this personification of Thermidorian reaction against the October Revolution. The book is riddled with factual errors and abounds in lapses of interpretive judgment. It is unfortunate that Service has been unable to incorporate new, hitherto unseen documents into a richer analysis of his subject.

Earlier in the review it was noted that Service had deliberately omitted any mention of Vadim Rogovin’s analysis of Stalin’s life and political career. In his seven volumes, Rogovin argues that there was indeed an alternative to Stalin, the Left Opposition led by Trotsky. Service wishes that Trotsky would go away; to the extent that he deals with Trotsky’s views, they are distorted beyond recognition.

Although Service doesn’t seem to be overly perturbed by it, there are

concerted efforts, particularly among Russian nationalists today, to rehabilitate Stalin. During the celebrations surrounding the 60th anniversary of the victory over fascist Germany, much was done to resurrect Stalin as the guiding figure of the Great Patriotic War. It is within this context that Service opines: “But exceptional he surely was. He was a real leader. He was also motivated by the lust for power as well as by ideas. He was in his own way an intellectual, and his level of literary and editorial craft was impressive. About his psychological traits there will always be controversy” [p. 603]. Not so much controversy, however, as to undermine his greatness. And if Service’s biography assists Stalin’s rehabilitation, the Oxford don will lose little sleep over it.

We probably have not heard the last of Service’s views. At a recent talk on his book, Service announced that he was working on a biography of Trotsky [!] and a history of the international communist movement. It is hard to imagine a historian less qualified to write either (actually, Richard Pipes comes to mind). Service is way in over his head, despite whatever accolades he receives for the Stalin biography (and, remarkably, there are those who praise the book).

A couple of conclusions are unavoidable: whatever awards Service receives for this deplorable book will be short-lived; in the long run, he will win only the opprobrium of disgruntled readers for producing such a shoddy biography. And if he does go ahead with his announced biography of Trotsky, let the buyer beware. It will not be a book worth reading.

Notes:

13. During these attacks, Stalin and his cohorts falsified history on a scale which was so vast that it inspired Orwell’s *1984*. Non-Stalinist historians have ever since known that no—literally no—document published by the Soviet bureaucracy during and after Stalin’s reign can be accepted as genuine. Whenever possible, sources must be checked and re-checked against originals for authenticity. Service hardly mentions this issue, and gives no sign that he checked anything. He liberally cites, for instance, all the protocols of the party congresses and conferences published throughout the 1950s and 1960s as if they are reliable. They are not. Unless this reviewer overlooked something, Service does not provide a single instance of falsification which he has exposed. For a thoughtful discussion of these issues, see: Alter Litvin, “Sources,” in the book: Alter Litvin and John Keep, *Stalinism. Russian and Western Views at the Turn of the Millennium*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 3-31.

14. Service sums up his analysis of Stalin’s role in organizing the defeat of the Spanish Revolution with mind-boggling formulations: “Economically, militarily and—above all—geographically there was no serious chance for him to do more than he achieved at the time. [!!!] ...Stalin acted within the cage of his assumptions” [!] [p. 389]. No wonder that the reader cannot be sure whether Service agrees or disagrees with his [presumably ironical] imitation of Stalinist invective: “Trotskyists were infectious vermin. Stalin’s Comintern agents fought for the cause of Soviet internal politics in the mountains and plains of distant Spain” [Ibid.].

15. It is hard to reconcile this statement with Stalin’s “Reply to an Inquiry of the Jewish News Agency of the United States,” January 12, 1931, in: J.V. Stalin, *Works*, vol. 13, p. 30. While Stalin may well have been cynically dissembling, he did write: “Anti-Semitism, as an extreme form of racial chauvinism, is the most dangerous vestige of cannibalism” [!]. Service seems unaware of this statement.

16. Service concedes Stalin’s anti-Semitism “right at the end” due to overwhelming evidence. See, for instance: *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom. The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, edited and with introductions by Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

17. Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937. Stalin’s Year of Terror*, Oak Park, MI : Mehring Books, 1998, pp. 154-63.

18. In a passage that strains credulity, Service’s account of the Trial of the

Sixteen is reduced to one paragraph on page 320. The second frame-up trial, where Radek, Pyatakov and Serebryakov were the main defendants, merits less than a paragraph on page 349. The third Moscow trial (Bukharin, Rykov, Krestinsky and Rakovsky, et al.) is dispatched in a slightly longer paragraph on pages 354-55. Service must have wondered why the philosopher John Dewey took the time to chair a commission to hear Trotsky’s unimpeachable refutation of the first two Moscow trials in April 1937. Dewey, to his everlasting credit, recognized that Stalin was carrying out one of the most shameless series of judicial frame-ups in world history. From Service’s perspective, however, despite the fact that his research has been endowed with innumerable new archival resources, the Moscow Trials should be treated as one more “storm in a tea-cup.”

19. For a brief but intelligent exploration of this issue, see: http://www.lloyd.co.uk/english/news/archive/070305_separated.htm

20. Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism. A Reply to Karl Kautsky*, London: New Park Publications, 1975, p. 2.

21. Ibid., p. 3.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact