

David North refutes falsifications of Trotsky's life at lectures in Scotland and Wales

Our reporters
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In lectures given in Scotland and Wales *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board chairman David North challenged the falsification of the historical role of Leon Trotsky contained in two recent biographies authored by British historians Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain.

Students at the universities of Glasgow in Scotland and Cardiff in Wales listened attentively to a lecture entitled "In Defence of Leon Trotsky: A Reply to the Post-Soviet School of Falsification" delivered at the end of April.

In opening the lecture in Glasgow on April 25, North noted that it was seventy years since the highpoint of Stalin's terror, directed at destroying what remained of Marxist political thought and culture in the Soviet Union.

"Even after the passage of 70 years, the number of those murdered by the Stalinist regime in 1937-38 has not been conclusively established and is a matter of debate. According to a recent analysis by Professor Michael Ellman of the University of Amsterdam, the 'best estimate that can currently be made of the number of repression deaths in 1937-38 is in the range of 950,000 to 1.2 million, i.e. about a million.'"

"No one who has studied the origins of the Stalinist terror and grappled seriously with its consequences is inclined to underestimate the politically reactionary and socially destructive implications of historical falsification," North said.

"We know from the example of the Soviet Union that the political process that first manifested itself as the falsification of the history of the Russian revolution eventually metastasised into the mass extermination of Russian revolutionaries."

Above all, the Stalinist lies and calumny were directed against Leon Trotsky and those who supported him. Trotsky, who was co-leader of the Russian revolution with Lenin, had conducted a brilliant military campaign as leader of the Red Army to defend the newly born workers' state from being destroyed by the imperialist armies and Russian reactionaries who waged war against it in the aftermath of the revolution. Later, as the Stalinist bureaucracy sought to consolidate its grip on power, it sought to depict Trotsky as an agent of various imperialist and fascist powers.

North quoted Trotsky saying, "To justify their privileges the ruling caste perverts the theory which has as its aim the elimination of all privileges. The lie serves, therefore, as the fundamental ideological cement of the bureaucracy".

However, there were also liberals and leftists in the West who were prepared to accept the Stalinist lies as good coin.

Not until nearly two decades had passed did "the edifice of Stalinist lies erected at the Moscow trials" begin to crumble, North stated, pointing to the "secret" speech delivered by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1956, which acknowledged the criminal character of Stalin's terror.

North highlighted several important works produced in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s by historian E.H. Carr and others, and the three-volume Trotsky biography by Isaac Deutscher, which challenged the Stalinist

falsifications on the basis of the objective historical record.

"The enduring significance of their collective efforts ... is that they contributed significantly to the refutation of the lies, distortions and half-truths in which the history of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union had been enshrouded for so many decades," North commented.

The major part of North's lecture was directed at exposing what he described as the "Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification".

"The principal objective of this school is to discredit Leon Trotsky as a significant historical figure and deny that he represented an alternative to Stalinism, and that his political legacy contains anything relevant in the present and valuable for the future."

North insisted that while every historian was entitled to his or her viewpoint, "these viewpoints must be grounded in a serious, honest and principled attitude toward the assembly of facts and the presentation of historical evidence."

"This is the essential quality that is deplorably absent in two new biographies of Leon Trotsky, by Professor Geoffrey Swain and Professor Ian Thatcher."

It is not possible in the space of this brief report to reproduce the detailed exposure provided in the lecture of both the method and content of the works by Swain and Thatcher. North's lecture will be published in full on the *World Socialist Web Site* in due course. It is possible to say that North's critique was devastating from the standpoint of enumerating deliberate falsifications of the historical record, the misuse of source material and even the attribution of positions to other historians that they do not hold. North made the point, with clear effect on many students present, that the two books would be rejected if presented for examination as a thesis as part of a degree course.

He drew particular attention to the contrast between the constant attempts of both authors to denigrate and belittle Trotsky and the overt apologia for the actions of Stalin.

In concluding his lecture, North addressed the question of the objective significance of the two recent Trotsky biographies. The widespread discrediting of all the major political parties, and particularly those traditionally associated with the workers movement, would inevitably throw up the question of a political alternative.

Under these conditions, it was inevitable that there would be a renewed interest in the life and work of Leon Trotsky. "That is what happened during the last great wave of radicalisation of workers and students. The more perceptive sections of the bourgeoisie recognise this danger and fear it. That is why distinguished publishing houses like Routledge and Longman commission works such as those produced by Swain and Thatcher. This is, as we know, the era of the pre-emptive war, and these books represent a sort of pre-emptive strike against the re-emergence of Trotskyism."

North also pointed to the use of the lie in preparing public opinion for the war in Iraq. "'Weapons of mass destruction' was a lie that has already led to the deaths of hundreds and thousands."

“The very future of the planet is in question if answers are not found to the crisis of the world capitalist system. The study of history must play a central role in the discovery of the answers required by humanity. But how can history be studied if its record is forged and falsified? The youth of the world need truth, for the discovery of objective truth is the intellectual driving force of human progress.”

The lectures received a warm and serious reception from the generally young audiences of students, academics and workers at Glasgow and Cardiff.

One audience member asked incredulously whether Swain, who lectures at Glasgow, or anyone from the faculty had seen fit to respond to North’s scathing critique. They had not, North replied, which was a measure of their lack of principle and inability to refute the damning points made against Swain.

North’s lecture at the University of Cardiff on April 27 provoked a number of questions.

North was asked whether legal action could be taken against Swain and Thatcher over their falsifications of Trotsky, given that in other areas of life their work would be considered libellous and in breach of advertising standards. The lecturer explained that although huge resources were being mobilised to falsify Trotsky’s political struggle, there was no legal solution to the issue.

“The most important issue is to understand why these lies are being propagated,” he said, “and to undertake an international counter-offensive against falsification.

“There is an enormous movement to the left now taking place among youth, students and sections of the working class, but this spontaneous movement must be intellectually fortified and armed with an historical understanding. This is not a simple process. One has to read and study and on that basis make this history accessible to a newer generation. There is nothing more powerful than the truth,” North insisted.

“The problems of mass society, which we confront today,” he continued, “require a collective response so there is therefore an objective need to know what happened in the Russian Revolution and the struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy.”

Commenting on contemporary Russia, North said that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a deeply tragic process and one that had brought horrific levels of poverty and social degradation alongside the acquisition of unbelievable wealth by a criminal business elite. He explained that the question posed before the Russian working class and the youth was to “establish contact with their extraordinary intellectual and political history” and the struggle of the Trotskyist movement.

Commenting on claims by two supporters of the Socialist Party of England and Wales in attendance that agitation on various tactical demands was the central issue, North warned, “Everyone, of course, is concerned about the attacks on health care, education and other important social issues and people talk about the method of the Transitional Program. What is often lost or forgotten, however, is that preparation for the Russian Revolution was a fight spanning decades to raise the level of political consciousness amongst workers...”

“The climate we work in today is full of falsehoods. You will get agreement with workers on a range of questions but you have to clarify the big historical questions. How do you think you will get workers back into the fight for socialism if you don’t explain what happened to the Russian revolution? It is impossible to get around the key historical questions.”

Another student suggested that each political event was unique and asked whether it was possible to apply previous historical lessons. North said that while there had been many changes the key issues of the epoch remained.

“The relationship between global economy and the nation-state system, private ownership of the means of production and social production,

imperialist war, the questions of social inequality and the problems of bureaucracy still remain,” North said. “All these problems impart to the writings of Trotsky extraordinary significance. These are the questions that dominated the beginning of the twentieth century and overshadow political events in this century.”

Speaking to the *WSWS* after the lecture in Glasgow, Jordan, a second year politics student from Dundee University, said, “It struck me that the tactics used by the historians David North was talking about are similar to the methods and lies put forward when the Stalinists were in power in the Soviet Union. It shows the crisis in society and the degeneration of intellectual life that they can pass these things off and no one challenges them.

“I think it is very important that the lecture put the record straight. I speak to lots of students who have left wing opinions or say they are socialists. But they are very disillusioned and don’t have a perspective or any idea about how to move forward.

“I personally have just attended a course of six lectures on Russia this semester, and I don’t think that Trotsky was mentioned once. The lectures dealt with the period from the dissolution of the Soviet Union up to the present day ... We had a lecture on Marxism in the first year. One of the books written by Karl Marx was discussed but the lecturer told us not to attempt to read the original text because it was ‘too hard’.”

Simone, a first year Italian student of linguistics, said, “I found that David North raised a number of very interesting arguments that can be applied today—what is happening in Italy for example, the way that history is taught in the schools. Students are told lies about Leon Trotsky and the causes of historical events. I would like to attend further lectures and learn more.”

Husband and wife, Alistair and Mary, both said that the lecture was very good and it was important that it told the truth about a crucial period of the twentieth century. Mary said, “It is frightening to think that students are being fed the kind of untruths about the Soviet Union that are in the books written by Professors Thatcher and Swain. They don’t want the truth to be known.”

Sue is currently reading, *1937—Stalin’s Year of Terror*, by Vadim Rogovin. She said that she thought it was very important that North began his lecture by paying tribute to the role that Rogovin played in uncovering the truth about the Moscow Trials and the Stalinist dictatorship. “He was a very brave man. His method was completely different from that of Swain and Thatcher. All his sources are meticulously recorded. What his book proves beyond doubt is that Stalin was not just a bad man. He was not mad. There was a definite plan. The Moscow Trials were a form of political genocide, to destroy all opposition within the Soviet Union. Like David North said, it was a pre-emptive strike and that is what is happening today.”

In Cardiff Stephen Hanks, a freelance filmmaker, said of the lecture, “It put into an intelligent and coherent form things I’ve been thinking about and arguing about with my friends.

“I knew who Trotsky was and had never been taken in by those who had lionised Stalin. I’d also read a lot of [George] Orwell and this provided me with some understanding that there was or should be some sort of alternative to the Stalinist regime.

“One of the main issues in the lecture, which is particularly important and was explained very well, is the necessity for truth. Unless you have fidelity for objective truth then you can’t understand anything.

“Take the media as an example. There is no sense of objective truth in the media today. All sorts of lies are propagated and few of them carry corrections columns. They can get away with virtually anything. The issues in the lecture are not just about politics but the necessity for an honest and objective approach on every issue. Without this there can be no rational or reasoned debate on any of the problems we now face.”



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