

Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification

A review of two Trotsky biographies by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher

Part 2: The study of Trotsky after the fall of the USSR

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Today we publish the first part of a four-part review of two biographies of Trotsky written by Professors Geoffrey Swain and Ian D. Thatcher. The first, third and final parts can be accessed [here](#). Click [here](#) to download the entire review in PDF.

Trotsky, by Geoffrey Swain. 237 pages, Longman, 2006.

Trotsky, by Ian D. Thatcher. 240 pages, Routledge, 2003.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 raised with new urgency the issue of the historical role of Leon Trotsky. After all, the Soviet implosion demanded an explanation. Amidst the bourgeois triumphalism that attended the dissolution of the USSR — which, by the way, not a single major bourgeois political leader had foreseen — the answer seemed obvious. The Soviet collapse of December 1991 flowed organically from the October 1917 Revolution. This theory, based on the assumption that a non-capitalist form of human society was simply impossible, found its way into several books published in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, of which the late Professor Martin Malia's *The Soviet Tragedy* was the most significant example.

However, books of this sort evaded the problem of historical alternatives; that is, were the policies pursued by Stalin and his successors the only options available to the USSR? Had the Soviet Union pursued different policies at various points in its 74-year history, might that have produced a significantly different historical outcome? To put the matter as succinctly as possible: Was there an alternative to Stalinism? I am not posing this as an abstract hypothetical counterfactual. Did there exist a socialist opposition to Stalinism? Did this opposition propose serious and substantial alternatives in terms of policy and program?

The answers to such crucial questions demand a serious reengagement with the ideas of Leon Trotsky and the oppositional movement that he led within the USSR and internationally. This, however, has not happened. Rather than building upon the achievements of earlier generations of scholars and drawing upon the vast new archival resources that have become available over the past 15 years, the dominant tendency in the historiography of the Soviet Union has been in a very different direction.

The years since the fall of the USSR have seen the emergence of what can best be 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, to deny that he represented an alternative to Stalinism, or that his political legacy contains anything relevant in the present and valuable for the future. Every historian is entitled to his or her viewpoint. But these viewpoints must be grounded in a serious, honest and principled attitude toward the assembling of facts and the presentation of historical evidence. It is this essential quality, however, that is deplorably absent in two new biographies of Leon

Trotsky, one by Professor Geoffrey Swain of the University of Glasgow and the other by Professor Ian D. Thatcher of Brunel University in West London. These works have been brought out by large and influential publishing houses. Swain's biography has been published by Longman; Thatcher's by Routledge. Their treatment of the life of Leon Trotsky is without the slightest scholarly merit. Both works make limited use of Trotsky's own writings, offering few substantial citations and even ignoring major books, essays and political statements.

Despite their publishers' claims that the biographies are based on significant original research, there is no indication that either Swain or Thatcher made use of the major archival collections of Trotsky's papers held at Harvard and Stanford Universities. Well-established facts relating to Trotsky's life are, without credible evidentiary foundation, "called into question" or dismissed as "myths," to use the authors' favorite phrases. While belittling and even mocking Trotsky, Swain and Thatcher repeatedly attempt to lend credibility and legitimacy to Stalin, frequently defending the latter against Trotsky's criticism and finding grounds to justify the attacks on Trotsky and the Left Opposition. In many cases, their own criticisms of Trotsky are recycled versions of old Stalinist falsifications.

The formats of the Swain and Thatcher biographies are similar in design and page length, and are clearly directed toward a student audience. The authors know, of course, that the books will be the first acquaintance with Trotsky for most of their readers; and they have crafted these two books in a manner calculated to disabuse readers of any further interest in their subject. As Professor Swain proclaims with evident satisfaction in the first paragraph of his volume, "Readers of this biography will not find their way to Trotskyism." [21] Nor, he might have added, will they derive any understanding of Trotsky's ideas, the principles for which he fought, and his place in the history of the twentieth century.

The "myth" of Trotsky

Both biographies proclaim that they challenge, undermine and even disprove "myths" about Trotsky's life and work. In a brief foreword to the Thatcher biography, the publisher asserts that "Key myths about Trotsky's heroic work as a revolutionary, especially in Russia's first revolution in 1905 and the Russian Civil War, are thrown into question." [22] Swain asserts that in his book "a rather different picture of Trotsky emerges to that traditionally drawn, more of the man and less of the myth." [23] What "myths" are they setting out to dispel? Significantly, both authors denounce the work of Isaac Deutscher, whom they hold responsible for creating the heroic historical persona that prevails to this day. Thatcher asserts condescendingly that Deutscher's trilogy reads like "a boy's own adventure story," a characteristic which "gives an

indication of the attractions, as well as the weaknesses, of Deutscher's tomes." Thatcher implies that Deutscher's biography is a dubious exercise in hero-worship, which "abounds with instances in which Trotsky saw further and deeper than those around him." With evident sarcasm, Thatcher suggests that Deutscher credited Trotsky with an improbably long list of political, practical and intellectual achievements. He accuses Deutscher of indulging in improper "invention" and of "diversions into fiction." These flaws, writes Thatcher, "do detract from the work's status as a history, and as historians we must approach Deutscher both critically and with caution." [24]

In fact, all historical works — even masterpieces of the genre — must be read critically. But Thatcher denigrates Deutscher's work not for its weaknesses, but for its greatest strength — its masterly restoration of Trotsky's revolutionary persona. As for the specific example used by Thatcher to support his claim of invention and diversions into fiction, he provides what turns out to be an incomplete citation from *The Prophet Armed*. When read in its entirety, Deutscher's use of analogy to recreate the mood that prevailed within the Bolshevik leadership at a time of intense crisis — the conflict over the Brest Litovsk treaty in February 1918 — may be appreciated as an example of the author's extraordinary literary skills and psychological insight. [25]

The significance of the two authors' antipathy toward Deutscher's trilogy emerges quite clearly in Swain's biography. He writes accusingly that "Deutscher went along with, and indeed helped to foster the Trotsky myth, the idea that he was 'the best Bolshevik': together Lenin and Trotsky carried out the October Revolution and, with Lenin's support, Trotsky consistently challenged Stalin from the end of 1922 onwards to save the revolution from its bureaucratic degeneration; in this version of events Trotsky was Lenin's heir." [26]

A "myth," as defined by Webster, is "an unfounded or false notion." But all the items listed by Swain as elements of the Deutscher-propagated "Trotsky myth" are grounded in facts supported by documentary evidence that has been cited by numerous historians over the past half-century. While Swain implies that Deutscher was involved in a conspiracy against historical truth (he "went along with, and indeed helped foster the Trotsky myth"), his real aim is to discredit historical work — that of Deutscher and many others — that shattered decades of Stalinist falsification. Well-established historical facts relating to Trotsky's life are subjected to the literary equivalent of a drumhead court-martial and declared to be mere "myths." No evidence of a factual character that is capable of withstanding serious scrutiny is produced to support the summary verdict pronounced by Swain and Thatcher. The aim of their exercise in pseudo-biography is to restore the historical position of Trotsky to where it stood before the works of Deutscher and, for that matter, E.H. Carr were published — that is, to the darkest period of the Stalin School of Falsification.

The appeal to authority

Let us now examine the method the two professors employ to discredit well-established historical facts. One of Swain's and Thatcher's favorite techniques is to make an outrageous and provocative statement about Trotsky, which flies in the face of what is known to be factually true, and then support it by citing the work of another author. Their readers are not provided with new facts that support Swain's and Thatcher's assertion. Rather, they are simply told that the statement is based on the work of some other historian.

Thus, Swain announces that he has "drawn heavily on the work of other scholars. Ian Thatcher has rediscovered the pre-1917 Trotsky as well as showing clearly how unreliable Trotsky's own writings can be. James White has completely reassessed the Lenin and Trotsky relationship in 1917, showing that the two men's visions of insurrection were entirely different. Eric van Ree demolished the notion that Trotsky was Lenin's heir. Richard Day, writing more than 30 years ago, argued convincingly

that Trotsky, far from being an internationalist, believed firmly in the possibility of building socialism in one country. More controversially, Nikolai Valentinov suggested nearly 50 years ago that in 1925, far from opposing Stalin, Trotsky was in alliance with him; although Valentinov's suggestion of a pact sealed at a secret meeting has not stood the test of time, other evidence confirms a period of testy collaboration." [27]

Presented here is what is known in logic as an appeal to authority. However, such an appeal is valid only to the extent of the authority's credibility. In this particular instance, the argument is not settled simply by citing Thatcher, White, van Ree, Day and Valentinov. We must know more about them, their work, and the evidence upon which they based their conclusions. And we must also know whether they actually held the position being attributed to them. As we shall see, the last question is particularly important, for when dealing with the work of Professors Swain and Thatcher, absolutely nothing can be taken for granted.

In regard to Swain's reference to Professor James White of the University of Glasgow, the latter hardly qualifies — for anyone familiar with his work — as a historian whose judgments on the subject of Trotsky can be accepted as authoritative, or, for that matter, even credible. [28]

As for van Ree, who is also one of Thatcher's favorite sources, his work as a historian must certainly be approached with caution, if not a face mask. As an ex-Maoist who is now a passionate anti-Communist, he recently offered, in a book entitled *World Revolution: The Communist Movement from Marx to Kim il-Jong*, the following assessment of Lenin and Trotsky:

"Yet all things considered they too were rogues, leaders of gangs of political thugs. They enjoyed prosecuting civil war. They proclaimed the Red Terror because they imagined themselves to be actors in a fantastic historical drama. They had the privilege of being allowed to repeat the performance at which Maximilien de Robespierre failed, and they were determined that this time round no one would be left alive who could possibly turn their fortunes against them. Lenin and Trotsky took pride in the fact that they did not care a jot about democracy or human rights. They enjoyed the exercise of their own brutality." [29]

Aside from their overheated character, none of these statements could be cited as an example of sober historical judgment. Professor van Ree is evidently a very angry man with quite a few political chips on his shoulder. He is not qualified to render decisive judgment on the nature of the Lenin-Trotsky relationship. However, I should note that according to the account given by van Ree in the above cited work, Lenin and Trotsky were partners in crime who shared the same criminal world view. Holding that view, how could van Ree "demolish the notion that Trotsky was Lenin's heir"? Moreover, in a discussion of the relationship between Lenin and Trotsky, the word "heir" has a political rather than legal connotation. Whether or not Trotsky should be considered Lenin's "heir" is precisely the sort of question over which historians will probably argue for decades to come. It is not likely to be settled in one essay, even one written by a scholar of substantially greater skill, knowledge, insight and judgment than Mr. van Ree. For Swain to assert that van Ree "demolished the notion that Trotsky was Lenin's heir" proves only that Swain has not thought through with sufficient care the complex historical, political, social and theoretical issues that arise in any serious study of the Lenin-Trotsky relationship.

Let us now consider Swain's invocation of Professor Richard Day to substantiate his own provocative thesis that Trotsky, "far from being an internationalist, firmly believed in the possibility of building socialism in one country." I must confess that I rubbed my eyes in amazement upon seeing Professor Day cited as an authority for such an outlandish statement. In contrast to the gentlemen to whom I have already referred, Professor Day is an outstanding and respected historian who for many decades has carried out serious work on the struggles within the Soviet government during the 1920s over economic policy. In particular, he has

subjected the work of E. A. Preobrazhensky to serious analysis and shed light on significant differences that existed within the Left Opposition on important problems of economic theory and policy.

Swain's reference to Day contains both distortion and falsification. In the work cited by Swain, *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*, Day employs certain formulations suggesting that Trotsky did not reject the possibility of socialism in one country, but opposed the conception that this could be achieved, as Stalin proposed, on an autarchic basis. Moreover, Day's discussion of Trotsky's position on "socialism in one country" must be read in the context of the book's presentation of the debate over Soviet economic policy. Swain, however, seizes on several ambiguous phrases employed by Day in the opening pages of his book, and proceeds to misrepresent the central analytical line of *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. Whatever the limitations of Day's argument, there is absolutely nothing in his book that supports Swain's claim that Trotsky was not an internationalist.[30] This is a blatant falsification of the argument presented in *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. [31]

I will not waste my time refuting the reference to Valentinov, an old Menshevik and bitter opponent of Trotsky. Swain does not even bother to provide us with an actual quote from Valentinov. No evidence whatever is offered to substantiate this claim. As for Valentinov's tale of "a pact sealed at a secret meeting," Swain himself acknowledges that it "has not stood the test of time." In other words, it was a fabrication. But why, then, does Swain even bring it up?

Rhetorical internationalism

Swain's use of sources whom he acknowledges to be unreliable is characteristic of his cynical attitude to the historical record. He has no compunction about making statements that contradict everything that is known and documented about Trotsky life. He tells us that "Trotsky believed in world revolution, but no more and no less than every other Bolshevik, and like all other Bolsheviks this belief was largely rhetorical." [32] In other words, there was, according to Swain, no difference in the place that the perspective of world revolution played in the lifework of Leon Trotsky from that which it played in the thoughts and activities of Molotov, Voroshilov, and Stalin! How does one even begin to answer an absurdity of this magnitude?

Readers are to believe that the political conceptions that governed Trotsky's political activity over a period of nearly 40 years, and which found expression in countless speeches and thousands of pages of written documents, represented nothing more than external posturing, devoid of serious intellectual, emotional and moral substance. Everything was merely a political subterfuge, a cover for what were essentially nationalist preoccupations related to the factional power struggle that Trotsky was conducting in the Soviet Union. As Swain writes:

"His critique of the failed German Revolution in 1923 was simply camouflage for an attack on his then domestic opponents Zinoviev and Kamenev. It was the same with his writings on the British General Strike, although here his opponents were Bukharin and Stalin. As for his enthusiasm for China in 1927, that too was essentially domestic in focus... It was only in emigration, in 1933, when he had buried the concept of Thermidor, that Trotsky explored the idea of how the revival of the working class movement in Europe might have a beneficial impact on the Soviet Union and halt the degeneration of the workers' state. Then internationalism became central to his cause." [33]

Swain evidently assumes that his student readership will be totally ignorant of the events and issues under discussion. He produces no evidence of a factual character to back his conclusion. Nor does he attempt to support his argument on the basis of an analysis of Trotsky's writings. This glaring omission reflects his general disinterest in Trotsky as a writer. Swain makes a point of telling his readers that his biography makes no reference to the "great" work by Professor Baruch Knei-Paz,

The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky. Swain acknowledges that this may come as a surprise to Trotsky scholars. But he defends his omission by arguing that Knei-Paz attributed greater importance to Trotsky's writings than they merit: "Knei-Paz collects together Trotsky's writings under certain themes, bringing together earlier and later essays into a coherent exposition; this exposition makes Trotsky a far greater thinker than he was in reality. Trotsky wrote an enormous amount and as a journalist, he was happy to write on subjects about which he knew very little." [34]

When a historian delivers such an unqualified judgment, it is to be expected that he will proceed to substantiate his claim. Swain should have supported it by pointing to specific essays or articles in which Trotsky showed himself to be ignorant of the subject matter with which he was dealing. Swain fails to present a single citation to support his argument. Instead, he continues in the same vein: "Trotsky could write beautifully, but he was no philosopher." [35] In fact, Trotsky never claimed to be one. But this did not prevent him from grasping more profoundly and precisely the social, political and economic realities of the age in which he lived than the philosophers of his generation. Who better understood the nature of twentieth century imperialism and fascism: Martin Heidegger, who ostentatiously proclaimed his allegiance to Hitler, or Trotsky? Who had deeper and clearer insights into the bankruptcy of Fabian reformism in Britain: Bertrand Russell or Trotsky? [36]

A more honest and capable historian might have included in an analysis of Trotsky's stature as a writer the following extract from the diaries of the great German literary critic, Walter Benjamin: "June 3, 1931 ... The previous evening, a discussion with Brecht, Brentano, and Hesse in the Café du Centre. The conversation turned to Trotsky; Brecht maintained there were good reasons for thinking that Trotsky was the greatest living European writer." [37] One can only imagine what Swain might have contributed to this conversation had he been present at the Café du Centre. "Well perhaps, Bertolt. But Trotsky is no philosopher!"

As one works through the entire biography, one cannot help but be amazed by the indifference that Swain displays toward Trotsky's writings. Many of his most important works are barely mentioned, or even totally ignored. Though he acknowledges Trotsky's decisive role in the victory of the Red Army in the Civil War, Swain ignores his important writings on military theory. This is a significant omission, because many of the political and theoretical differences that arose between Trotsky and the Stalinist faction in later years were anticipated in the earlier conflicts over military policy. [38] There is no reference to Trotsky's extraordinary manifestos and speeches prepared for the first four Congresses of the Communist International (1919-1922). He makes no mention of Trotsky's far-sighted analysis of the emergence of American imperialism to a position of world domination and its evolving relationship with a declining and dependent Europe. This does not prevent Swain from proclaiming pompously that Trotsky "had absolutely no understanding of European politics." [39] One might just as well write that Einstein had no understanding of physics! Such ludicrous statements are written for only one purpose: to fill the minds of students who are unfamiliar with Trotsky's life and the historical period in which he lived with intellectually disorienting absurdities.

Swain's effort to convert Trotsky into an enthusiastic partisan of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country" amounts to a grotesque distortion and outright falsification of his actual views. Swain attributes to Lenin the authorship of this conception, noting that Stalin's lecture in which the new program was introduced invoked a quotation from an article Lenin had written in 1915. He fails to explain that Stalin ripped this quote out of context, and conveniently ignored the innumerable statements by Lenin emphatically linking the fate of socialism in Russia to the world revolution. More seriously, whether from ignorance, sheer incomprehension or design, Swain falsifies the views of Leon Trotsky.

Referring to the 1925 series of articles by Trotsky published under the title, *Towards Socialism or Capitalism?*, Swain asserts that its logic “was clear. Socialism in one country could work if the correct economic policy was followed and state industrial investment gradually accelerated.”[40]

If one identifies the possibility of initiating socialist construction within the USSR (which Trotsky advocated and encouraged) with the long-term viability of a Soviet form of nationalism (which Trotsky emphatically rejected), the theoretical content and political implications of the debate over economic policy are rendered incomprehensible. Even in *Towards Socialism or Capitalism?*, written in 1925 when he was still working through the implications of the nationalist shift in the theoretical basis of Soviet economic policy, Trotsky explicitly warned that the long-term survival of world capitalism meant that “socialism in a backward country would be confronted with great dangers.”[41] In September 1926 he declared that “The Opposition is profoundly convinced in the victory of socialism in our country not because our country can be torn free of the world economy but because the victory of the proletarian revolution is guaranteed the world over.”[42] In other words, socialism could be built in Russia if the working class conquered power in revolutionary struggles beyond its borders. Trotsky’s speech to the Fifteenth Conference on November 1, 1926 was a comprehensive attack on the perspective of national socialism.[43] Swain, of course, ignores this and other crucial texts that must be examined in order to deal correctly with the issue of “socialism in one country.”

Swain on 1923

Swain’s treatment of the crucial opening round of Trotsky’s struggle against the degeneration of the Soviet Communist Party is little more than a defense of the emerging Stalinist faction against Trotsky’s criticisms. Especially significant is Swain’s condemnation of a letter and series of articles written by Trotsky in early December 1923 under the title, *The New Course*. Swain writes:

“In the programmatic essay *The New Course*, written on 8 December and published after some haggling in *Pravda* on 11 December 1923, Trotsky denounced the increasingly bureaucratic leadership of the Party, asserting that the old, established leadership was in conflict with a younger generation. In one of those exaggerated parallels he loved, he compared the situation among the Bolshevik leaders with the time in the history of the German Social Democratic Party when the once radical allies of Marx and Engels slipped almost imperceptibly into a new role as the fathers of reformism. It was a nice image, but Kamenev, Stalin and Zinoviev were hardly going to relish the implication that only Trotsky was the true revolutionary and that they were mere reformists.

“In writing *The New Course*, Trotsky not only insulted his Politburo colleagues but, in Bolshevik terms, he gave them the moral high ground. He had reached an agreement and then broken it. He had done the same with Lenin at the height of the Brest Litovsk crisis. During the Trade Union Debate he had joined the Zinoviev Commission only to declare he would take no part in its work. The resolution against factionalism adopted at the Tenth Party Congress had been aimed specifically at preventing this sort of behavior. Whether or not Trotsky’s behavior had verged on factionalism in autumn 1923 could be open to interpretation, but *The New Course* was factionalist beyond doubt. He had signed up to a compromise, and then broken with it, challenging the revolutionary credentials of his Politburo comrades in the process.”[44]

What Swain offers here is not an objective account of the political origins, issues and events related to the conflict that erupted inside the Soviet Communist Party, but rather his own highly partisan defense of those who were the objects of Trotsky’s criticisms. Swain’s angry references to Trotsky’s behavior during the Brest Litovsk crisis in 1918 and the trade union conflict in 1920 read as if they were copied from the texts of Stalin’s own speeches. Swain tells us that Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin “were hardly going to relish” Trotsky’s criticisms, as if that

somehow invalidates what Trotsky wrote in *The New Course*.

It is peculiar, to say the least, for a historian writing in 2006 to upbraid Trotsky for having engaged in “factionalist” behavior in launching what was to become one of the epochal political conflicts of the twentieth century. Swain, enjoying the benefit of hindsight, knows how all of this was to eventually turn out. The suppression of inner-party democracy, against which Trotsky raised his protest, was ultimately to grow into a murderous totalitarian dictatorship that carried out mass murder. And while Trotsky’s criticisms may have bruised the egos of Kamenev and Zinoviev, the two Old Bolsheviks suffered a far more terrible fate at the hands of Stalin 13 years later. Moreover, for Swain to chastise Trotsky’s warning of the danger of political degeneration of the older generation of Bolshevik leaders as “exaggerated” is nothing less than incredible. As history was to demonstrate all too tragically, Trotsky’s invocation of the example of the German Social Democratic leaders was, if anything, an underestimation of the dimensions of the tragedy that awaited the Bolshevik Party.

As for the specific charge that the writing of *The New Course* was inappropriate and factional behavior, it is not based on an honest reading of the historical record. Swain conveniently fails to note that the Politburo was dominated by a secret faction formed by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, which was grounded not on programmatic agreement, but rather on a shared determination to undermine Trotsky’s political influence. Thus, Trotsky was working inside a Politburo whose deliberations were tainted by *ex parte* agreements worked out behind the scenes by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev. Moreover, as E. H. Carr explained quite cogently in 1954, Trotsky’s letter of December 8 — part of the set of documents known as *The New Course* — was of an entirely principled character.

“The letter took the form of a commentary on the resolution of 5 December: it was an exposition of what Trotsky assumed the resolution to mean and a rebuttal of any other potential interpretations. It was not, as was afterwards pretended, a deliberate attack on the agreed text or on other members of the Politburo and of the central committee. The views were those which Trotsky, as he naively believed, had persuaded or compelled his colleagues to share. All that the letter did was, in Trotsky’s intention, to dot the i’s and cross the t’s of the resolution and to register his victory.”[45]

Carr also explains that the triumvirate and Trotsky had approached the drafting of the December 5, 1923 resolution on party reform with very different aims and criteria. For Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev, the actual content of the resolution was of secondary or even tertiary significance. Their interest in arriving at an agreement with Trotsky was based on purely tactical considerations, related to the struggle for power. With opposition spreading to the increasingly bureaucratic and high-handed methods of the leadership, the triumvirs were seeking to prevent, or at least delay, Trotsky’s open break with the central committee leadership. For Trotsky, in contrast, the resolution raised matters of high principle. Carr noted the difference between Trotsky and his opponents. “Trotsky, accustomed to see differences within the party fought out and settled through the drafting of party resolutions, attached to a victory on paper a practical value which, in the new conditions of party leadership, it no longer possessed.”[46]

Carr’s assessment is endorsed by historian Robert V. Daniels in his influential *The Conscience of the Revolution*. Explaining the sequence of events that led to the writing of *The New Course*, Daniels writes: “Trotsky, aware of the hostility toward him that was barely concealed behind the resolution, undertook to stress the reform implications in an open letter to a party meeting on December 8. The New Course letter was an enthusiastic endorsement and explanation of the resolution of December 5, with emphasis on the role of the party rank-and-file in its execution...”[47]

Entirely absent from Swain's account is an analysis of the objective processes that underlay the deepening political conflict. Swain offers virtually no assessment of the changes that were taking place under the impact of the New Economic Policy (NEP) within the Soviet Union and their reflection within the Party. He provides no political or intellectual portraits of Trotsky's opponents. He does not examine the changing composition of the Bolshevik Party, or examine the phenomenon of bureaucracy that was to have such catastrophic consequences for the fate of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet society.

Swain's treatment of Trotsky's final exile

Swain devotes just 25 pages to the last 12 years of Trotsky's life. To describe his treatment of those years as superficial would be a compliment. The most catastrophic event in post-World War I European history, the accession of Hitler and his Nazi party to power in Germany, barely receives a mention. Swain takes no note of the relationship between this event and the most important political decisions made by Trotsky during his final exile — his call for a political revolution in the USSR and for the founding of the Fourth International. After briefly noting that Trotsky, upon arriving in Prinkipo in 1929 following his expulsion from the USSR, called on his supporters to remain inside the Communist International, Swain writes: "By 1933 he had changed his mind..."[48] No reference is made to the cataclysmic event that produced this change in policy — the accession of Hitler to power as a result of the betrayal of the Communist International and its German party. Swain makes no assessment of Trotsky's writings on the German crisis. One has only to compare Swain's near silence on the subject to E.H. Carr's treatment of Trotsky's efforts to rouse the German working class against the fascist threat. In his last work, *The Twilight of the Comintern*, Carr considered Trotsky's writings on the German crisis of 1931-33 to be of such importance that he included an appendix devoted to this subject. "Trotsky," he wrote, "maintained during the period of Hitler's rise to power so persistent and, for the most part, so prescient a commentary on the course of events in Germany as to deserve record..."[49]

Similarly the Moscow Trials and the ensuing purges are assigned a few sentences, substantially less than Swain devotes to Trotsky's brief personal relationship with Frida Kahlo in Mexico. The writing of Trotsky's most important political treatise, *The Revolution Betrayed*, is noted in one sentence. Trotsky's passionate essays on the Spanish Revolution, warning that the popular front policies of the Stalinists were clearing the path for a Franco victory, go unmentioned. The *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, is not referred to. Swain also ignores the last great polemical documents written by Trotsky on the nature of the USSR. Finally, Swain concludes his biography with the observation that Trotsky might have done better had he quit politics after the 1917 October Revolution and devoted himself entirely to journalism, in which, presumably, Trotsky would have been able — as Swain has already told us — "to write on subjects about which he knew very little."

Endnotes:

[21] *Trotsky*, by Geoffrey Swain (UK, 2006), p. 1. Hereafter referred to as Swain. [return]

[22] *Trotsky*, by Ian D. Thatcher (London and New York, 2003), p. i. Hereafter referred to as Thatcher. [return]

[23] Swain, p. 1. [return]

[24] Thatcher, pp. 15-16. [return]

[25] Thatcher claims that "Deutscher simply puts thoughts into his subjects' heads for which there is no evidence," and he cites a passage "which [writes Thatcher] compares the disputes among the Bolsheviks over the peace with Germany with a dilemma faced by the Paris Commune over whether to wage a revolutionary war, and if so against whom..." Thatcher then presents the passage to which he objects: "Trotsky, who so often looked at the Russian Revolution through the

prism of the French, must have been aware of this analogy. ... He must have seen himself as acting a role potentially reminiscent of Danton's, while Lenin's part was similar to Robespierre's. It was as if the shadow of the guillotine had for a moment interposed itself between him and Lenin. ... This consideration was decisive in Trotsky's eyes. In order to banish the shadow of the guillotine he made an extraordinary sacrifice of principle and personal ambition."

When one contrasts Thatcher's citation to the original passage as it appears in Deutscher's biography, it is immediately clear that the accusation of fictionalizing is entirely inappropriate. As Deutscher made very clear, he was using an analogy to clarify a complex political dispute. His recreation of what Trotsky might have been thinking in that situation — his conflict with Lenin over whether Soviet Russia should accept German terms at Brest Litovsk — is well within the bounds of historical writing, particularly as Deutscher has made clear that there is an element of speculation on his part. Those passages left out by Thatcher are presented in italics:

"Some analogy to the situation which was likely to occur if Trotsky had acted otherwise may be found in the three-cornered struggle that developed between the Commune of Paris, Danton and Robespierre during the French Revolution. In 1793 the Commune (and Anacharsis Cloots) stood, as Bukharin and the Left Communists were to do, for war against all the anti-revolutionary governments of Europe. Danton advocated war against Prussia and agreement with England, where he hoped that Fox would replace Pitt in office. Robespierre urged the Convention to wage war against England; and he strove for an agreement with Prussia. Danton and Robespierre joined hands against the Commune, but, after they suppressed it they fell out. The guillotine settled their controversy.

"Trotsky, who so often looked at the Russian Revolution through the prism of the French, must have been aware of this analogy. *He may have remembered Engels's remarkable letter to Victor Adler, explaining all the 'pulsations' of the French Revolution by the fortunes of war and the disagreements engendered by it.* He must have seen himself as acting a role potentially reminiscent of Danton's, while Lenin's part was similar to Robespierre's. It was as if the shadow of the guillotine had for a moment interposed itself between him and Lenin. *This is not to say that if the conflict had developed, Trotsky, like Danton, would necessarily have played a losing game; or that Lenin was, like Robespierre, inclined to settle by the guillotine an inner party controversy. Here the analogy ceases to apply. It was evident that the war party, if it won, would be driven to suppress its opponents — otherwise it could not cope with its task. A peaceable solution to the crisis in the party was possible only under the rule of the adherents of peace, who could better afford to tolerate opposition.* This consideration was decisive in Trotsky's eyes. In order to banish the shadow of the guillotine he made an extraordinary sacrifice of principle and personal ambition." (*The Prophet Unarmed* (London, 1954), pp. 390-91. [return]

[26] Swain, p. 1. [return]

[27] Swain, pp. 1-2. [return]

[28] Professor James White has taught for many years at the University of Glasgow and has been a major influence on Thatcher. White has devoted considerable effort to rehabilitating Stalin and discrediting Trotsky. In his zeal to belittle Trotsky, White has at times appeared to play the clown — as with his claim, in a notorious article published in his short-lived *Journal of Trotsky Studies* (co-edited with Ian Thatcher), that on the deciding night of the October 1917 insurrection, Trotsky did nothing of importance. "Thus while other members of the Military Revolutionary Committee went off to engage in some kind of revolutionary action, Trotsky was left behind with Kamenev — who had opposed the insurrection — to answer the telephone." [Volume 1, 1993, p. 18] That is how Professor White described the work of the principal strategist and

leader of the insurrection.

White has also insisted, in defiance of well-established historical fact, that Stalin's political line toward the Provisional Government in March 1917 more or less coincided with that fought for by Lenin upon his return to Russia in April. As for the specific matter of the Lenin-Trotsky relationship in 1917, it has long been known — indeed, Trotsky wrote about it in his autobiography in 1929 — that there were differences between the two principal leaders of the Bolshevik Party on the execution of the insurrection. The differences related to tactics, not “vision.” [return]

[29] http://www.nlpvf.nl/docs/VanRee_WorldRevolution_screen.pdf, p. 25. [return]

[30] To deal appropriately with Day's argument would require a detailed examination. His thesis does not lend itself to a careless one-line summary. At no time does Day suggest that there existed any similarity between “socialism in one country” as that term found expression in Stalin's program and Trotsky's acceptance of the possibility of initiating socialist *construction* within the USSR, as long as that construction recognized the necessity of contact with the world market and a correct international revolutionary policy. Day describes Stalin's efforts to present his arguments in defense of economic nationalism as “utter nonsense” that found acceptance in a demoralized political environment in which “the party wished to be deceived.” Day observes that Stalin's “clever marshalling of quotations allowed him to impart a degree of forensic sophistication to an argument which otherwise would have been dismissed as a contemptible fraud.” [*Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 100-01.] This last sentence might serve as a fair description of Swain's procedure. [return]

[31] This is not merely my subjective opinion. After reading Swain's false presentation of the matter, I contacted Professor Day in Canada and brought this matter to his attention. In an e-mail letter written on March 13, 2007, I cited the relevant passage from Swain's biography, and asked Professor Day whether he was aware of it. I added that the citation from Swain “strikes me as a rather crass misrepresentation of your argument in *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. As I understand, you considered the decisive question in the inner-party struggle over economic policy to be whether socialism could be built in an isolated country. On this critical point, the position held by Trotsky — as you have consistently argued — was fundamentally opposed to the conceptions advanced by Preobrazhensky, not to mention Stalin.”

I received on the same day a response from Professor Day, stating that “you are absolutely correct concerning my point of view.” He then added, “There really has been so much interminable garbage written about Trotsky, and I am distressed to hear of another addition to the pile from Professor Swain. I truly cannot imagine how anyone could possibly say that Trotsky was not an ‘internationalist’ from beginning to end. It is a stunning misreading of the historical record.” [return]

[32] Swain, p. 2. [return]

[33] Swain, p. 3. [return]

[34] Swain, p. 3. Swain's exclusion of Knei-Paz from his references reflects the essentially dishonest intentions of his [Swain's] own work. Swain can find no useful purpose in the work of Knei-Paz, whose point of departure is the explicit acknowledgement that Trotsky was an important political thinker and a major figure in twentieth century European culture. For Knei-Paz, Trotsky was not only a “quintessential revolutionary in an age which has not lacked in revolutionary figures.” Trotsky's “achievements in the realm of theory and ideas are in many ways no less prodigious: he was among the first to analyze the emergence, in the twentieth century, of social change in backward societies, and among the first, as well, to attempt to explain the political consequences which would almost inevitably grow out of such change. He wrote voluminously throughout his life, and the political thinker in him was no less an intrinsic part of his personality than the better-known man of action.” *The Social*

and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky (London, 1978) pp. viii-ix [return]

[35] Swain, p. 3. [return]

[36] Trotsky did write many brilliant essays on the subject of dialectical materialist philosophy. But Swain says nothing about these works, nor does he evince the slightest interest in the philosophical method employed by Trotsky in his writings. [return]

[37] *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927-1934 (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 477. [return]

[38] While Swain at least credits Trotsky for the victory of the Red Army in the Civil War, his account fails to identify or analyze the elements of his military leadership that were critical to the victory of the revolutionary forces. For a serious study of Trotsky's development as a military theorist and revolutionary general, the interested reader would be well-advised to consult the perceptive work of Col. Harold Walter Nelson, *Leon Trotsky and the Art of Insurrection* [London, 1988]. Writing as a military expert, Col. Nelson (who taught at the US Army War College) provides a thoroughly objective and professional account of Trotsky's maturation as a significant figure in military history. Nelson concentrates on the period between 1905 and 1917, and Trotsky emerges in his account “as a genuine revolutionary general — one who can lead and coordinate decisive revolutionary action. He comes to understand the problems of armed conflict which the revolution must solve, he gains an appreciation of the resources which the revolution can call upon to solve these problems, he develops schemes for organizing these resources for maximum effectiveness, and he discerns the factors which motivate the men who must fight to gain the revolutionary victory.” (p. 4) [return]

[39] Swain, p. 195. [return]

[40] Swain, p. 160. [return]

[41] London, 1976, p. 60. [return]

[42] *The Challenge of the Left Opposition* 1926-27 (New York, 1980), p. 106. [return]

[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 130-164. [return]

[44] Swain, p. 152. [return]

[45] *The Interregnum* (London, 1954) p. 318. [return]

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 313. [return]

[47] *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), p. 223. [return]

[48] Swain, p. 194. [return]

[49] New York, 1982, p. 433. [return]



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