

# A letter on academic ethics in response to David North's "Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification"

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*The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to, "Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification: A review of two Trotsky biographies by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher".*

Thank you for posting David North's painstaking critique of these recently released "biographies" of Leon Trotsky by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher. It is difficult to make sense of the historiography of the Soviet Union—much less of the roles played by Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin—when trusted historians and academics put their conclusions ahead of the facts. As an academic myself, I find this shoddy form of "scholarship" a breach of professional ethics.

Fortunately, Swain's and Thatcher's versions of Trotsky are not the last word. North's review reveals their errors, omissions, and deceptions with rigor.

In addressing the issue of shoddy scholarship, North exposes an element within academia that uses its credentials and elite resources to promulgate preconceived historical opinions. Swain and Thatcher are not unique in their selective revisionism. One wonders what objective conditions within academia encourage intellectuals to abuse the public trust, including that of students enrolled in their classes. At the very least, the doctorate degree confers presumptive rights of expertise.

Society rightly expects certified scholars to be properly schooled in the art of rhetoric and research. Under the ethos of intellectual honesty, academics are given license to write *non-fiction* for a public readership. What separates them from the less educated is this very presumption that as a matter of professional competence, they do not deliberately or negligently engage in fallacious reasoning.

As North puts it, "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."

Without a doubt, when an academic pads the facts, the malfeasance derives in part from the fact that they should, or in fact do, know better. And yet, the harmful consequences

of academic negligence are more protracted and less obvious than they might be within medicine or commerce. In a culture of capitalism, the negatives are too often rewarded, if they are detected at all.

Distortions inserted into publications that eventually gain legitimacy on course syllabi and library shelves intervene in the culture of the day and eventually seep into the annals of future reference books. When trusted historians participate in the falsification of history, their audiences are placed in a difficult situation due to the fact that professional scholars, even more than commercial journalists, are given the benefit of the doubt.

What leads university professors to consciously or unconsciously supplant good scholarship with shoddy? The contradiction at the heart of academic culture as it exists currently in capitalist economies is the tension between intellectual integrity and the increasing imperative to run universities as private, self-sustaining, for-profit concerns with close ties to corporate markets. At the very least, professors are expected to engage in legitimate research and first-rate pedagogy because, among other things, the reputation of the given university depends upon their "draw factor."

Given the extreme difficulty of qualifying for tenure, which pits assistant and associate professors in competition with their counterparts, the "publish or perish" imperative pressures academics to publish at all costs. One *must* get his or her work into peer-reviewed journals in the academic press within the first few years of hire, or start all over at a different university.

Fresh from grad school, new hires must pass through the interview circuit, uproot his or her family, set up office in a new town, and teach a full-time load, all the while designing and implementing fresh curricula given the information technology at hand. Teaching skills are under scrutiny by committees of faculty peers, administrators and anonymous student course evaluations. This is in the best-case scenario because, as the argument goes, such hurdles make for

dedicated, rise-to-the top scholars, talented in multiple areas and certified by blind review processes.

In principle it works. In practice it can be brutal. Moreover, if reviewers turn out to be members of, or friends of friends of the academic in question, a self-referencing clique can fast-track the publication process and sanction the granting of tenure. Those of us in academia sincerely hope this is rare, and we discourage it where we can for the most part. But in cases where the administration has a mission statement to fulfill, the padding of faculty in areas thought to be of interest to external endowment dollars eclipses other priorities. Pragmatism and opportunism emerge.

Once the candidate *has* tenure, his or her book proposal can be sold to an executive editor on the basis of his or her professorship alone. The result is that obscurantists get published along with first-rate scholars. On a less generous reading, the fraud is sinister. North puts this in context: certain historians of the Soviet era abandoned altogether the responsibility of historical writing in service to creating “a new demonology.” For such writers, Trotsky in particular became “an abstraction of evil—a militating force against the future of the Soviet people.”

Modern-day historians like Swain and Thatcher also have a choice: portray Trotsky as an enemy of the state, or as a true leader and keeper of the revolution and Leninism. North shows that they chose the former. Both denigrate bona fide biographies by others not for their weaknesses, which would be fair game, but for their “masterly restoration of Trotsky’s revolutionary persona.” North, unlike Swain and Thatcher, does not expect his audience to take his claims at his word. Backed with precise textual references, North’s explanations respect the reader’s integrity and encourage a living, meaningful scientific analysis of history. Only after he presents the objective facts does he render an explanation of motives: “The aim of their [Swain and Thatcher] exercise in pseudo-biography is to restore the historical position of Trotsky to where it stood before...to the darkest period of the Stalin School of Falsification.”

Indeed, in an impressive dedication to ferreting out the truth, North contacted one of Swain’s sources, Professor Richard Day, who according to Swain “argued convincingly that Trotsky, far from being an internationalist, believed firmly in the possibility of building socialism in one country.” What Professor Day said in response to North’s fact-checking is quite damning of 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.”

One can only guess that Swain assumes his largely student audience will not know better. His method of poisoning the well carries over to his calling into question the work of

Professor Baruch Nei-Paz, on the grounds that the way he compiled Trotsky’s source documents under certain themes “makes Trotsky a far greater thinker than he was in reality.” I would add that, by this line of reasoning, all the collected works of the ancient Greeks through Marx would fall by the wayside, since they too were compiled by secretaries and disciples into coherent expositions.

When a biographer omits the texts in question, in this case those by Trotsky, it amounts to failing to let the accused speak at his trial. When Swain in particular vilifies Trotsky without supplying a single citation to back up his claim, he must be hoping that his readers have actually not read Trotsky. Indeed, Swain expects his readers to buy into his preposterous claim that “Trotsky’s logic was clear: Socialism in one country could work if the correct economic policy was followed and state industrial investment gradually accelerated.”

In a similar vein, Swain appeals to biased figures in history for his smear campaign. Rather than citing Trotsky’s own *New Course* for his claim that the writing of the *New Course* was “inappropriate and factional behavior,” he simply repeats the invectives supplied by Trotsky’s ideological opponents: the triumvirate itself—Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, who sought to undermine Trotsky’s political influence.

Clearly Swain’s biography of Trotsky is no biography. He creates of the real Trotsky a strawman, and after tilting his lance at his own false rendering of Trotsky, he believes he has knocked down the real Trotsky.

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