In The Service of Historical Falsification: A Review of Robert Service's Trotsky

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*This essay is available in pdf format (*letter *or* A4*). To purchase it in pamphlet form, click* here*. (See also* "Leon Trotsky and the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification"*)*

Trotsky: A Biography
Robert Service
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Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009

The Specter of Leon Trotsky

In 1955 James Burnham, the intellectual godfather of modern American neo-conservatism, reviewed *The Prophet Armed*, the first volume of Isaac Deutscher's monumental biography of Leon [Lev Davidovich] Trotsky. Fifteen years had passed since Burnham had resigned from the Fourth International at the climax of a political struggle in which he had crossed polemical swords with Leon Trotsky. It had been a difficult experience for Burnham, who felt somewhat overmatched in this political and literary contest. "I must stop awhile in wonder," Burnham had written in a document addressed to Trotsky, "at the technical perfection of the verbal structure you have created, the dynamic sweep of your rhetoric, the burning expression of your unconquerable devotion to the socialist ideal, the sudden, witty, flashing metaphors that sparkle through your pages." (1)

In the aftermath of his repudiation of socialism, Burnham moved rapidly to the extreme right (as Trotsky had predicted). By the mid-1950s he viewed Trotsky's life and work through the prism of his own ideological commitment to a global struggle against Marxism. Deutscher's work filled Burnham with alarm. The problem was not literary in character. Burnham readily acknowledged the author's masterful reconstruction of Trotsky's revolutionary persona.

"Mr. Deutscher has cast his story of Trotsky in the Greek mould, and with sufficient justification," Burnham wrote. "His Trotsky is a protagonist of the most dazzling brilliance, who rises in 1905, 1917 and in the Civil War to successive heights where he fuses with History and becomes her voice." Burnham allowed that the author had succeeded in conveying to his readers Trotsky's extraordinary qualities: "the flaming oratory, which many who heard him believe to have been the greatest of our century; the linguistic facility; the witty and vibrant prose; the quickness with which Trotsky mastered every new subject; the breadth of interest, so rare among the dedicated revolutionaries."

Burnham noted that Deutscher's portrait of Trotsky was not one-sided; that he "conscientiously displays, also, Trotsky's weaknesses…" But despite the many literary virtues of the biography, Burnham denounced it as an "intellectual disaster." Burnham's reason for his condemnation was that "Mr. Deutscher writes from a point of view that accepts and legitimizes the Bolshevik revolution." The biography was "organically warped" and unacceptable. "Not all the scholarly references from all the libraries are enough to wash out the Bolshevik stain."

Burnham confessed his horror that Deutscher had received "all the courtesies of our leading research institutions, the aid of our foundations, the pages of our magazines, publication and promotion by the great Anglo-Saxon Oxford Press." Did the establishment not recognize the danger in allowing, and even encouraging, the details of Trotsky's heroic life and revolutionary ideas to reach the broader public, and especially the youth?

Burnham concluded his review with a cry of despair: "The minds of many of our university students and opinion-makers are being deeply formed, on the supremely important issues with which he [Deutscher] deals, by his ideas. It is surely one more among the many indications of the suicidal mania of the western world." (2) The conclusion that implicitly flowed from this review was that Deutscher's book and others like it, which portrayed the October Revolution and its leaders sympathetically, should not be published.

Burnham's fears, at least from his political standpoint, were not without justification. He foresaw the subversive potential of Deutscher's rehabilitation of Trotsky, whose historic role and political ideas had been buried for so many decades beneath the massive heap of Stalinist lies. In February 1956 Khrushchev's "secret speech" at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Union's Communist Party more or less admitted that Stalin was a mass murderer and vindicated the indictment issued 20 years earlier by the dictator's implacable opponent. In the years that followed, the political stature of Leon Trotsky rapidly grew throughout the world.

Against the backdrop of growing working class militancy and the radicalization of youth, Deutscher's biographical trilogy – *The Prophet Armed, The Prophet Unarmed* and *The Prophet Outcast* – introduced countless thousands of youth, intellectuals and workers to the deeds and ideas of Leon Trotsky. Organizations that claimed to base themselves on the political heritage of Trotsky grew significantly in the 1960s and 1970s. This was particularly the case in Britain. As early as 1964, the leadership of the Young Socialists, youth movement of the British Labour Party, passed into the hands of the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and even into the 1980s, the activities of Trotskyist organizations were a major preoccupation of the principal British Intelligence agency, the MI5. (3)

A New Offensive Against Trotsky

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This historical experience is worth recalling as one considers a peculiar literary phenomenon: the publication, within the space of little more than five years, of three biographies of Leon Trotsky by British historians. In 2003 Professor Ian Thatcher of Leicester University (and previously of Glasgow University) produced his *Trotsky*, which was published by Routledge. Three years later Longman published the *Trotsky* of Glasgow University's Geoffrey Swain. And now, as 2009 draws to a close, the *Trotsky: A Biography* by Professor Robert Service of St. Antony's College, Oxford, has been brought out with considerable fanfare. The British publisher is Macmillan. In the United States, Service's book has been published by the Harvard University Press. What underlies this evident interest of British academics in Leon Trotsky, who has been dead for nearly 70 years?

This reviewer has in another place submitted the works of Thatcher and Swain to an exhaustive analysis, and proved that they are crass exercises in historical falsification, of absolutely no value to anyone interested in learning about the life and ideas of Leon Trotsky. As if heeding Burnham's warning, Thatcher and Swain were determined not to provide Trotsky with a platform, and therefore took care to quote as little as possible from his writings. Both works set out to reverse the popular image of Trotsky that had emerged from Deutscher's great trilogy. Thatcher and Swain belittled Deutscher for creating the "myth" of Trotsky as a great revolutionary, Marxist theoretician, military leader, political analyst, and opponent of the totalitarian bureaucracy. The Thatcher-Swain biographies set out to create a new anti-Trotsky narrative, utilizing slanders and fabrications of old Stalinist vintage in the interest of contemporary anti-communism. (4)

Now comes Robert Service's contribution to the on-going efforts to demolish Leon Trotsky's historical reputation. In its pre-publication promotional material, the Harvard University Press proclaims: "Although Trotsky's followers clung to the stubborn view of him as a pure revolutionary and a powerful intellect hounded into exile by Stalin, the reality is very different. [Service's] illuminating portrait of the man and his legacy sets the record straight." Does it really?

Biography as Character Assassination

Trotsky: A Biography is a crude and offensive book, produced without respect for the most minimal standards of scholarship. Service's "research," if one wishes to call it that, has been conducted in bad faith. His *Trotsky* is not history, but, rather, an exercise in character assassination. Service is not content to distort and falsify Trotsky's political deeds and ideas. Frequently descending to the level of a grocery store tabloid, Service attempts to splatter filth on Trotsky's personal life. Among his favorite devices is to refer to "rumors" about Trotsky's intimate relations, without even bothering to identify the rumor's source, let alone substantiate its credibility.

Trotsky once declared, as he defended himself against the slanders of Stalin's regime: "There is not a stain on my revolutionary honor." Service, however, portrays Trotsky as an individual without any honor at all. He attempts to discredit Trotsky not only as a revolutionary politician, but also as a man. Service's Trotsky is a heartless and vain individual who used associates for his own egotistical purposes, a faithless husband who callously abandoned his wife, and a father who was coldly indifferent to his children and even responsible for their deaths. "People did not have to wait long before discovering how vain and self-centered he was," Service writes of Trotsky in a typical passage. [56]

Service's biography is loaded with such petty insults. Trotsky was "volatile and untrustworthy." "He was an arrogant individual" who "egocentrically assumed that his opinions, if expressed in vivid language, would win him victory." "His self-absorption was extreme. As a husband he treated his first wife shabbily. He ignored the needs of his children especially when his political interests intervened." [4]

Trotsky's intellectual and political life was, Service would have his readers believe, as shabby as his personal life. Trotsky's "lust for dictatorship and terror were barely disguised in the Civil War. He trampled on the civil rights of millions of people including the industrial workers." As for his subsequent political defeat, Service dismisses, without counter-argument, Trotsky's analysis of the growth of the Soviet bureaucracy and its usurpation of political power. Service simply asserts, as if he were stating the obvious, that Trotsky "lost to a man [Stalin] and a clique with a superior understanding of Soviet public life." [4]

According to Service, Trotsky was nothing more than a second- or third-rate thinker. Trotsky, he writes, "made no claim to intellectual originality: he would have been ridiculed if he had tried." [109] "Intellectually he flitted from topic to topic and felt no stimulus to systematize his thinking." [110] Trotsky wrote quickly and superficially: "He simply loved to be seated at a desk, fountain pen in hand, scribbling out the latest opus. Nobody dared to disturb him when the flow of words was forming in his head." [319] And what was the result of this "scribbling"? Service writes: "His thought was a confused and confusing ragbag." [353] "He spent a lot of time in disputing, less of it in thinking. Style prevailed over content…This involved an ultimate lack of seriousness as an intellectual." [356] This is Service's verdict on the literary work of a man who must be counted among the greatest writers of the twentieth century. (5)

A biographer need not like or even respect his subject. No one would suggest that Ian Kershaw harbors the slightest sympathy for Adolf Hitler, to whose life he devoted two extraordinary volumes that were the product of many years of research. However, whether a biographer admires, despises or feels a cool and detached ambivalence toward the object of his scholarly attention, he must respect the factual record and strive to *understand* that person. The biographer has the responsibility to examine a life in the context of the conditions of the times in which his subject lived. But this is beyond Service's intellectual capacities and the boundaries of his knowledge. Instead, in a manner both pointless and absurd, he assumes from the outset the standpoint of a disapproving career counselor. Trotsky, Service opines in the biography's introduction, "could easily have achieved a great career as a journalist or essayist if politics had not become his preoccupation." But Trotsky did choose a career in politics, and revolutionary politics at that, a decision that Service cannot abide or come to grips with.

Service describes his book as "the first full-length biography of Trotsky written by someone outside Russia who is not a Trotskyist." [xxi] What is meant by "full-length"? Service's biography is certainly long, plodding on for 501 pages. But in terms of content, it is no more than a super-sized version of the biographies produced by Thatcher and Swain. Like the earlier works, this is a biography without history. There is not a single historical event that is recounted with anything remotely approaching the necessary level of detail.

Service reduces the immense and complex drama of the revolutionary epoch in Russia to a series of vacuous tableaux, which serve only as the scenic background for Service's ridicule of Trotsky's alleged political, personal and moral failures. The coming to power of the Nazis in 1933, the eruption of the Spanish Civil War and the formation of the Popular Front in France are dealt with in a few desultory sentences. Even the Moscow Trials and the Terror merit little more than a page. Far more attention is given by Service to Trotsky's brief intimacy with Frida

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Kahlo!

A Compendium of Errors

Moreover, the biography is full of factual errors that call attention to the author's extremely limited comprehension of the historical material. In the course of a disoriented excursion into Trotsky's pre-1917 views on the subject of revolutionary terror, Service writes that Trotsky "spoke out against 'individual terror' in 1909 when the Socialist-Revolutionaries murdered the police informer Evno Azev, who had penetrated their Central Committee." [113] In fact, *Azef* (the correct transliteration from the Russian spelling) was not murdered in 1909. He was not murdered at all. Azef, who had organized terrorist acts, including assassinations, while working as an agent of the *Okhrana* inside the Socialist Revolutionary Party, survived his exposure and died of natural causes in 1918. Service fails to quote even a single sentence from Trotsky's important article on the Azef affair.

Discussing the events of 1923 in Germany, Service asserts that the revolution failed after "Street fighting petered out" in Berlin. [31] In fact, there was no fighting in Berlin. The leadership of the Communist Party called off the uprising before fighting could begin in the capital. The only serious fighting in a major German city occurred in Hamburg.

In a passing reference to the Chinese Revolution, Service states that the Communist International sent instructions for an insurrection against Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang in April 1927. "It was just the excuse that Chiang needed to conduct a bloody suppression of communists in Shanghai and elsewhere." [355] This is wrong. No such plan existed and no such instructions were sent. Service confuses the events in Shanghai in April 1927 with later developments in Canton.

In another passage, Service writes that in June 1928 Trotsky was working on his critique of the programme of the Comintern's Fifth Congress. [371] Actually, the Fifth Congress was held in 1924. The critique to which Service is referring was addressed to the Sixth Congress.

Service even manages to get the year of the death of Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, wrong. He states, "She died in 1960, deeply mourned by her network of Mexican, French and American friends." [496] In fact, Sedova died in January 1962 at the age of 79. Several months before her death, in November 1961, as one would expect a biographer of Trotsky to know, Natalia Sedova had written to the Soviet government, demanding a review of the Moscow Trials and the rehabilitation of Trotsky. At the end of the book, in yet another gross blunder, Service misidentifies the wife and daughter of Trotsky's youngest son, Sergei, as being the wife and daughter of the older son, Lev. [500-501] These errors got by not only the editors at Macmillan and the Harvard University Press, but also eluded the none-too-watchful eye of Professor Ian Thatcher, who, we are informed by Service, read the entire manuscript.

Following the same procedure as Thatcher and Swain, Service fails to engage himself with Trotsky's writings. With the exception of Trotsky's *My Life,* which Service attempts to discredit, there is no persuasive evidence that the biographer worked systematically through any of Trotsky's published books and pamphlets prior to writing this biography. Aside from the writings of Ian Thatcher, whom he profusely praises, Service has paid little attention to existing scholarly literature on Trotsky. Service affects an attitude of contempt toward biographers, educated in the Marxist tradition, who have taken Trotsky's literary output seriously. The late Pierre Broué, a highly respected historian and the author of a massively researched and authoritative biography of Trotsky, is dismissed as an "idolater." Deutscher is mocked as one who "worshipped at Trotsky's shrine." [xxi]

There is reason to doubt that Service actually read the work of most of the other historians to whom he pays perfunctory tribute in his preface. For example, Service takes note of Professor Alexander Rabinowitch as a historian who subjected Trotsky to "skeptical scrutiny," and lumps him together with James White of Glasgow University, who ridiculously denies that Trotsky played any significant role in the October 1917 seizure of power. [xxi] In fact, Professor Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* substantiated Trotsky's role as the principal tactician and practical leader of the Bolshevik victory.

Despite Service's self-satisfied description of his biography as "full-length," there are virtually no extracts from, or adequate summaries of, Trotsky's major political works. Service does not even review the basic concepts and postulates of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, which formed the foundation of Trotsky's political work over a period of 35 years. His voluminous writings on China, Germany, Spain, France and even Britain are barely mentioned.

On the few occasions when Service does refer to one of Trotsky's books, what he has to say is usually wrong. In a thoroughly confused reference to *Literature and Revolution*, Service attributes to Trotsky the view that "It would take many years … before a 'proletarian culture' would be widely achieved." [317] Trotsky, as anyone who has actually read *Literature and Revolution* knows, emphatically rejected the concept of "proletarian culture." (6) But Service does not know this – either because he did not read the book or because he was not able to understand it.

By now the reader must be wondering how Service, without paying attention to Trotsky's writings, manages to keep himself occupied for 501 pages. How is it possible to write a "full-length biography" of a man who was among the most prolific writers of the twentieth century without paying the necessary attention to his literary output?

Unearthing Trotsky's "Buried Life"

As if anticipating this question, Service informs his readers at the very outset that his central concern is not with what Trotsky wrote or actually did. "This book's purpose," Service writes, "is to dig up the buried life." He allows that "the evidence starts with the works – his books, articles and speeches – which he published in his lifetime." But that is not sufficient. Even the study of all of Trotsky's writings would "tell us about his big objectives without always elucidating his personal or factional purposes at any given moment. As an active politician he could not always afford to spell out what he was up to." [4-5]

Service continues:

His written legacy should not be allowed to become the entire story. It is sometimes in the supposedly trivial residues rather than in the grand public statements that the perspective of his career is most effectively reconstructed: his lifestyle, income, housing, family relationships, mannerisms and everyday assumptions about the rest of humanity. … As with Lenin and Stalin, moreover, it is as important to pinpoint what Trotsky was silent about as what he chose to speak or write about. *His unuttered basic assumptions were integral to the amalgam of his life*. [Emphasis added, 5]

This statement is truly one with which Stalin, who was very careful not to tell other people what he really thought, could agree. It is entirely in line with the inquisitorial principle employed by Stalin in the organization of the Moscow trials. Evidence of crimes against the Soviet state was not to be found in the public statements, writings and deeds of the Old

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Bolshevik defendants. Rather, their terrorist conspiracies flowed from the "unuttered basic assumptions" that had been camouflaged beneath the public record.

And how does Professor Service intend to ferret out Trotsky's "unuttered basic assumptions"? Service announces that Trotsky's "buried life" can be uncovered by examining unpublished early drafts of his writings. "The excisions and amendments tell us what he did not want others to know. This is particularly true of his autobiography." [5]

This statement forms the basis of Service's major accusation against Trotsky: that his autobiography, *My Life*, which he wrote in 1930, is an unreliable and suspect work. Service complains that Trotsky's "account of himself has been accepted uncritically by generations of readers. The reality was different, for whenever inconvenient facts obscured his desired image he removed or distorted them." [11]

Trotsky's Embarrassments

And precisely what did Trotsky conceal or falsify in *My Life*? There are two major discrepancies that Service claims to have discovered when he compared the first draft of Trotsky's autobiography, which is deposited at Stanford University's Hoover Institute, with the published version. The first is Trotsky's supposed efforts to conceal the extent of the wealth of his father, David Bronstein. The second, to which Service devotes obsessive attention, is Trotsky's supposed attempts to downplay his Jewish origins. Service writes:

As a Marxist he was embarrassed about the wealth of his parents, and he never properly acknowledged their extraordinary qualities and achievements. What is more, the published account of his boyhood in his autobiography tended to drop those passages where he appeared timid or pampered; and without denying his Jewish origin he trimmed back references to it. By examining the drafts and proofs, we can catch glimpses of aspects of his upbringing that have long lain hidden. Thus he stated publicly only that his father was a prosperous, competent farmer. This hugely understated the reality. David Bronstein, married to Aneta, was among the most dynamic farmers for miles around in Kherson province. By hard work and determination he had dragged himself up the ladder of economic success and had every right to be proud of his achievement." [12]

Before answering Service's allegation that Trotsky downplayed his father's wealth and sought to conceal his ethnic and religious background, let us first draw attention to the dubious character of the underlying claim: that the progression of drafts to their completed form is best understood as a process of concealment and falsification. Service asserts what he must first prove. To support his charge, he would have to show why Trotsky's "excisions and amendments" should not be seen as the proper exercise of artistic discretion by a great master. There are many reasons, which have nothing to do with the intention to conceal, why Trotsky may have removed certain passages and added others.

Service fails to provide a single example in which Trotsky's published account of his childhood differs in any material way from the earlier draft. At any rate, Service's allegations are entirely without substance. That Trotsky "was embarrassed about the wealth of his parents" is a claim for which Service can cite no authority other than his own imagination. Trotsky's account traced his father's rising prosperity, though it must be pointed out that David Bronstein achieved significant wealth only well after Trotsky had left home. The Bronstein family did not move from the mud house in which Trotsky was born into a house built with bricks until the future revolutionary was almost 17 years old. But Trotsky provides in *My Life* a richly detailed and affectionate account of his father's relentless struggle to rise in the world and to accumulate wealth. Writing of his own social position as a child, Trotsky stated: "As son of a prosperous landowner, I belonged to the privileged class rather than to the oppressed." [*My Life* (New York: Dover, 2007), p. 87]

Max Eastman's 1926 biographical account of Trotsky's early life states that David Bronstein "got rich working and hiring the peasants to work with him. He controlled almost three thousand acres of land around the little Ukrainian village of Ianovka, owned the mill, and was altogether the important man of the place." Eastman knew these facts because Trotsky related them to him. Eastman wrote, "Trotsky is proud of his father, proud of the fact that he died working and understanding. He loves to talk about him." [*The Young Trotsky (*London: New Park, 1980), p. 3]

Service's own account of the Bronstein family – whom he refers to as "plucky Jews" [14] – is based entirely on what was published in *My Life* and Eastman's *Young Trotsky*. He has conducted no new and independent research that either adds to, or refutes, the information provided by Trotsky and Eastman. There is not a single detail in Service's account of Trotsky's early childhood that cannot be traced back to these two earlier works.

Even more astonishing, in light of his claims to have exposed the untrustworthiness of Trotsky's autobiography, Service relies for his depiction of Trotsky's youth almost entirely on the published version of *My Life*, not on the earlier draft. In the second chapter of his biography, entitled "Upbringing," Service includes nine substantial extracts from Trotsky's autobiographical writing. Eight of them are reproduced from the published version of *My Life*; only one is from the earlier draft. In not one instance is Service able to pinpoint an important discrepancy between the published work and the draft.

That does not mean that Service comes up entirely empty handed in his exploration of the draft version of *My Life*. For example, he discovers that a young school friend whom Trotsky identifies as Carlson in the published edition of the autobiography was identified as "Kreitser" in the draft. This discovery, proudly noted by Service in a footnote, must surely be counted as a major breakthrough in the field of Trotsky studies! If he had accomplished nothing else, Service has, with one mighty footnote, restored young Kreitser's name to its proper place in history.

Trotsky's Origins

Let us now turn to Service's contention that Trotsky sought to downplay his Jewish ancestry. There is, to be blunt, something rather unpleasant and suspect about Service's preoccupation with this matter. The fact that Trotsky was a Jew occupies a central place in Service's biography. It is never far from Service's mind. He is constantly reminding his readers of this fact, as if he were worried that it might slip from their attention. Indeed, given the emphasis placed on Trotsky's ethnicity, this book might have very well been titled, *Trotsky: The Biography of a Jew*.

Before we explore this disturbing element of Service's biography in greater detail, let us first respond to the allegation that Trotsky sought to conceal or deflect attention from his ancestry. This claim is as false as the biographer's contention that Trotsky sought to downplay the wealth of his parents. As always, Service assumes that his audience will never bother to read Trotsky's autobiography, in which Trotsky exhibits not the slightest reticence in discussing his ethnic and religious background. And how

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could he have possibly avoided the subject? The circumstances of his childhood were inextricably intertwined with his Jewish ancestry.

Trotsky's depiction of his Jewish background and its place in his intellectual and political development is entirely consistent with what is known of the broader Odessa-influenced social and cultural milieu within which he lived. Trotsky writes candidly about the place of religion in the life of his family:

…In my father's family there was no strict observation of religion. At first, appearances were kept up through sheer inertia: on holy days my parents journeyed to the synagogue in the colony; Mother abstained from sewing on Saturdays, at least within the sight of others. But all this ceremonial observance of religion lessened as years went on – as the children grew up and the prosperity of the family increased. Father did not believe in God from his youth, and in later years spoke openly about it in front of Mother and the children. Mother preferred to avoid the subject, but when the occasion required would raise her eyes in prayer. (7)

As for his own relation to his Jewish origins, Trotsky explained:

In my mental equipment, nationality never occupied an independent place, as it was felt but little in every-day life. It is true that after the laws of 1881, which restricted the rights of Jews in Russia, my father was unable to buy more land, as he was so anxious to do, but could only lease it under cover. This, however, scarcely affected my own position. As son of a prosperous landowner, I belonged to the privileged class rather than to the oppressed. The language in my family and household was Russian-Ukrainian. True enough, the number of Jewish boys allowed to join the school was limited to a fixed percentage on account of which I lost one year. (8)

Trotsky reflected on the relation of his Jewish background to his intellectual development:

This national inequality probably was one of the underlying causes of my dissatisfaction with the existing order, but it was lost among all the other phases of social injustice. It never played a leading part – not even a recognized one – in the list of my grievances. (9)

The Torah and the Rabbi

Service is quite clearly dissatisfied with this explanation, which he does not even bother to quote. He sets out to "correct" Trotsky's account by attempting to make the subject's life conform to the prejudices of the biographer. This effort proves unfortunate for the credibility of Mr. Service. In a key passage, which supposedly refutes *My Life*, Service writes that Trotsky

liked to give the impression that he was integrated into every common aspect of school activities. This was not so. St. Paul's, like all Imperial schools, had to teach religion. Leiba Bronstein entered it as a Jew and did not convert to Christianity. He had to continue his spiritual devotions under the guidance of a rabbi who taught the Jewish pupils, and David Bronstein paid for his services. The rabbi in question failed to make clear whether the Torah was superb literature or holy writ – and Leiba was later to conclude that he really was an agnostic of some kind. [37]

This account is attributed by Service to Max Eastman's *The Young Trotsky*, which was published in 1926. But has Service been faithful to Eastman's narration? Let us take a look at the original text. This is how Eastman tells this story:

It had been the ambition of his father's – as combining cultural elevation with a certain conventional piety – to have a private tutor read the Bible with his son in the original Hebrew. Trotsky, being only eleven years old, was somewhat abashed before the bearded old scholar who undertook the task. And the scholar, being old and full of his duty, was hesitant about unveiling his own critical views to so young a boy. So it was not clear at first whether they were reading the Bible as history or as literature, or as the revealed word of God. (10)

There is a quite noticeable difference between the two accounts. Eastman's "Bible" becomes, in Service's account, the "Torah." Eastman's "bearded old scholar," who reveals himself to be an agnostic, is transformed by Service into a "rabbi." It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the text was, indeed, the Torah – though this word generally conveys a wider range of texts than that encompassed in the Pentateuch. But as Service has no additional information to offer, beyond what Eastman wrote, what is the purpose of this change in wording? There is even less justification for Service's transformation of the old agnostic scholar into a rabbi. It should be stressed that this is not a translation issue. Service is referencing an English-language text.

It might be possible to dismiss this as nothing more than a careless exercise of authorial imagination but for the fact that Service's continuous harping on Trotsky's religious background is obsessive, obnoxious, and, in its cumulative impact, ugly. He employs the suspect device of noting anti-Semitic attitudes and then proceeding to reinforce them. The reader is offered such passages as the following on page 192:

Russian anti-Semites had picked out Jews as a race without patriotic commitment to Russia. By becoming the foreign minister for a government *more interested in spreading world revolution than in defending the country's interests* Trotsky was conforming to a widespread stereotype of the 'Jewish problem.' … As things stood he had already become the most famous Jew on earth. America's Red Cross leader in Russia, Colonel Raymond Robins, put this with characteristic pungency. Talking to Robert Bruce Lockhart, head of the British diplomatic mission in Moscow, he described Trotsky as 'a four kind son of a bitch, but the greatest Jew since Christ.' Trotsky, furthermore, was merely the most famous Jew in a Sovnarkom where Jews were present to a disproportionate degree. The same was true in the Bolshevik central party leadership. If Lenin were to have dispensed with the services of talented Jews, he could never have formed a cabinet. [Emphasis added]

Robert Service and the Jews

This passage is shortly followed by a chapter entitled "Trotsky and the Jews," which begins: "Trotsky hated it when people emphasized his Jewish background." [198] This emotion may have had something to do with the type of people who were inclined to do the emphasizing. There follow several pages of pointless and ridiculous observations. On page 201 the reader is helpfully informed that "Trotsky's rejection of Judaism by no means meant that he shunned individual Jews." After naming a few of the Jews with whom Trotsky was on good terms (all major figures in the Russian and European socialist movement), Service notes (also on page 201) that "Trotsky also had companions who were cosmopolitans without being Jews." Trotsky, you see, "spoke a lot with August Bebel," the founder-leader of the German Social Democratic Party. The biographer allows that "there was no trace of Judaism in Trotsky's adult lifestyle," although there were many "secularized Jews [who] continued to observe religious food prohibitions and celebrate traditional feast days."

Service then proceeds to call his readers attention to the fact, in case

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they had not made the appropriate mental note, that Trotsky's four children – Nina, Zina, Lev and Sergei – "were given names without association with Jewishness."

More important information follows on page 202: Trotsky "was *brash in his cleverness, outspoken in his opinions. No one could intimidate him*. Trotsky *had these characteristics to a higher degree than most other Jews* emancipated from the traditions of their religious community and the restrictions of the Imperial order. He was manifestly an individual of exceptional talent. But he *was far from being the only Jew who visibly enjoyed the opportunities for public self-advancement*. In later years, they were to constitute *a model for Jewish youth to follow in the world communist movement* when, like communists of all nationalities, they spoke loudly and wrote sharply regardless of other people's sensitivities. Trotsky can hardly be diagnosed as having suffered from the supposed syndrome of the self-hating Jew. Hatred did not come into the matter. He was too delighted with himself and his life to be troubled by embarrassments about his ancestry." [Emphasis added]

Having suggested that Trotsky's revolutionary career was an example of Jews taking advantage of opportunities for "public self-advancement," Service develops this idea in the next paragraph:

"Trotsky was one of those tens of thousands of educated Jews in the Russian Empire who at last could assert themselves in situations where their parents had needed to bow and scrape before Gentile officialdom." Many Jews, Service notes thoughtfully, sought advancement in respectable professions. But "the second route was to join the revolutionary parties where Jews constituted a disproportionate element." This is a theory of well-known anti-Semitic parentage: revolution as a form of aggressively ambitious Jewish revenge against a society dominated by Christians. But Service has still more to say on this subject. He declares:

"Young Jewish men and women, trained in the rigors of the Torah, found a congenial secular orthodoxy in Marxist intricacies. Hair-splitting disputes were common to Marxism and Judaism (as they were to Protestantism)." It is now possible to explain Service's previous twisting of the Eastman citation. Trotsky, according to Service's distorted account, had also been trained in the "rigors of the Torah." From there, the reader is led to believe, it was only for the career-minded Bronstein a hop, skip and jump to *Das Kapital*, the Theory of Permanent Revolution, and a corner suite in the Kremlin.

Service, on page 205, writes that: "The party's leadership was widely identified as a Jewish gang." No source is given for this statement. He adds, a few sentences down, "Jews indeed were widely alleged to dominate the Bolshevik party." Again, there is no source provided for this allegation. These allegations are not challenged, let alone refuted. On the next page, 206, Service reproduces a paragraph from an "anonymous letter to Soviet authorities" which is a wild anti-Semitic denunciation of "full-blooded Jews who have given themselves Russian surnames to trick the Russian people."

In another bizarre passage, dealing with the famous negotiations conducted by Trotsky with representatives of Germany and Austria-Hungary at Brest-Litovsk in 1918, Service writes: "As the Germans and Austrians strode to the table for talks they expected to be treated with deference. They acted as if victory was already theirs. They shared the prejudices of their social class. For them, socialists of any kind were hardly human. Russian communists, who included so many Jews in their leadership, were little better than vermin." [197]

Service fails to provide a source for this assessment of the attitudes of the German delegates. In his autobiography, Trotsky wrote: "At Brest-Litovsk, the first Soviet delegation, headed by Joffe, was treated in a most ingratiating way by the Germans. Prince Leopold of Bavaria received them as his 'guests.' All the delegations had dinner and supper together." Trotsky noted with bemusement that "General Hoffmann's staff was publishing a paper called *Russky Vyestnik (The Russian Messenger)* for the benefit of the Russian prisoners; in its early phases it always spoke of the Bolsheviks with the most touching sympathy." (11)

Naturally, this initial friendliness was politically motivated and did not last long. The deadly seriousness of the issues that confronted the opposing parties at Brest-Litovsk inevitably found expression in the increasingly tense and confrontational atmosphere. This process is depicted brilliantly by Trotsky in *My Life*. His characterizations of his chief adversaries, Kühlmann, Hoffmann and Czernin, are true to life. They are political reactionaries, representatives of the aristocratic elite, but not monsters. Their attitude toward the Bolsheviks is a complex mixture of curiosity, bewilderment, fear, hatred and respect. In Trotsky's account, there is no suggestion that he was dealing with men who viewed the Bolsheviks, with or without Jews, as "vermin." That thought belongs to Service, not to the leaders of the German and Austrian delegates at Brest-Litovsk.

For all Service's preoccupation with Trotsky's religion, his book is remarkably uninformed by any of the very serious and outstanding scholarship on the question of Jewish life and culture in Odessa and Imperial Russia. The important works of Steven J. Zipperstein of Stanford University are not included in Service's bibliography. There is nothing more than a fleeting reference to the bloody anti-Semitic pogroms that killed thousands. Service does not even mention the infamous case of Mendel Beilis, the Jewish worker who was arrested in 1911 for the ritual murder of a Christian youth – a case that provoked international outrage against the tsarist regime. Had he bothered to do so, Service might have taken note of Trotsky's important and influential essay on this case.

This reviewer wishes to register his disgust with Service's inclusion among the biography's illustrations, for no obvious reason, of a Nazi caricature of "Leiba Trotzky-Braunstein." The caption provided by Service states: "In reality, his real nose was neither long nor bent and he never allowed his goatee to become straggly or his hair ill-kempt." Did Service intend this as a joke? If so, it is in very bad taste.

What, then, should be made of Service's obsessive fixation with Trotsky's Jewish background? The use of anti-Semitism as a political weapon against Trotsky is so well known that it is impossible to believe that Service's incessant invocation of his subject's Jewish roots is innocent. Whatever Mr. Service's personal attitude to what he refers to as "the Jewish problem," he is all too obviously making an appeal precisely to anti-Semites for whom Trotsky's Jewish background is a major concern. It is fairly certain that the Russian-language edition of this biography will find favor within this reactionary constituency. One cannot help but suspect that Professor Service has taken this into consideration.

Service's Sources

A substantial portion of Service's book is devoted to the blackguarding of Trotsky's personality. He extends his efforts to discredit Trotsky as a revolutionary politician to every aspect of his personal life. Service seems to believe that the Theory of Permanent Revolution will be less persuasive if Trotsky can be shown to have been an unpleasant individual. And so, Service's portrait of Trotsky never rises above the level of a vulgar caricature. His subject is always impossibly vain, insensitive, domineering and egotistical. Service is intent to show that these traits were already painfully apparent when Trotsky was still a teenager. He relies entirely on the testimony of a single individual, Gregory A. Ziv, who first met Trotsky in the late 1890s during the first stages of his revolutionary activities. Much later, in 1921, after he had emigrated to the United States,

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Ziv wrote a bitter memoir which was extremely hostile to the former friend and comrade who had, in the meantime, become the world famous leader of the Russian Revolution.

No one would deny that Ziv's memoir is a document that any serious historian would consult in the preparation of a biography of Trotsky. After all, Ziv knew Trotsky at a critical juncture in the life of the emerging revolutionary. But a historian is obligated to approach documents and sources critically, to carefully consider the degree of trust that can be invested in the information they provide. A highly critical approach is certainly warranted in the case of Ziv. There are many reasons to doubt the objectivity and reliability of his evaluation of Trotsky's personality. First and foremost, Ziv, after he arrived in the United States, became extremely hostile to Trotsky's stand on the imperialist war. Ziv was a supporter of Russia's participation in the "war for democracy." This information is not given to the reader by Service. But Max Eastman, who was familiar with Ziv's memoir, offered the following background information:

When Trotsky came to New York [in January 1917] during [the] war – anti-patriot, anti-war, revolutionist – he met Doctor Ziv, who he knew had been publishing a little pro-war paper there in the Russian language. He met him most cordially; and wishing to remember the friendly emotions of these earlier days, he invited him to his house. They talked long and drifted back to the mood of their recollections. But Trotsky, knowing that Ziv could teach him nothing and that he could convince Ziv of nothing, refrained from opening the political question. It was characteristically courteous, and a very friendly, exercise of judgment. But to the doctor's editorial vanity it seemed to have been an unendurable offense, the manifestation of a self-seeking intellectual arrogance which he suddenly discovered had characterized his friend's activities from the cradle. Hence this little volume of weak and ludicrous personal spite. (12)

Prosecutors are legally obligated to make exculpatory evidence available to the defense. Following this general principle, a biographer should not conceal from his readers information that calls into question the credibility of the witness whose testimony he is citing. But Service is indifferent to such principled considerations. While insisting that Trotsky's memoirs must be subjected to the most skeptical scrutiny, Service shows absolutely no inclination to question anything written by Ziv in his memoir. And so he quotes Ziv's statement that Trotsky "loved his friends and he loved them sincerely; but his love was of the kind that a peasant has for his horse, which assists in the confirmation of his peasant individuality." [46] This observation makes so deep an impression on Service that he repeats it: "Lëva looked on his revolutionary comrades as the peasant regarded his horse…" [46] What intelligent reader would believe such nonsense?

Enter Schopenhauer

Another claim by Ziv that Service seizes upon concerns the influence of a pamphlet by Artur Schopenhauer, the 19th century German idealist philosopher, upon the young Trotsky. Service does not actually provide an extract from this passage, but presents only a summary. For the purpose of clarifying this issue, which sheds light on Service's method, this reviewer has consulted Ziv's original text.

In his memoir Ziv devotes slightly more than one paragraph to this question. He notes that Schopenhauer's pamphlet "somehow fell into his [Trotsky's] hands," and then offers a brief summary of the philosopher's argument. The purpose of the pamphlet is to teach "how to vanquish one's opponent in debate, regardless of whether one was actually correct or not." The pamphlet, according to Ziv, "does not teach rules which must be followed in conducting a debate, but rather exposes devices – more or less crude, or more or less subtle – to which debaters resort in order to be victorious in a debate." Then, in a somewhat surprising admission, Ziv indicates that he does not have any precise information on the impact of the pamphlet on his friend. He writes: "*One can imagine how Bronstein was overjoyed by this small pamphlet that by no means was less valuable for its small size."* Yes, many things can be imagined, but that does not make them true. Ziv's wording suggests that he did not have any direct evidence that the work made a great impression on Trotsky. He did not write, for example, "Bronstein told me that he was overjoyed by this pamphlet…" If Mr. Ziv was giving sworn testimony, as a witness for the prosecution, the defense attorney would question him carefully on this point. Indeed, after noting that Ziv acknowledges that he does not even know how Trotsky obtained the pamphlet, he would probably ask: "Mr. Ziv, do you really know for sure that Trotsky ever read the *Art of Controversy?* Did you ever actually witness him reading the book?" As a matter of fact, based on what Ziv wrote, we cannot know for sure whether Trotsky did read *The Art of Controversy*. But the answer to this question is, for the purpose of evaluating this biography, less important than Service's failure to question Ziv's claims.

Quite the opposite. Service goes far beyond the claims of Ziv. He writes, "Lëva prepared himself as if for a military campaign. He *scrutinized* Schopenhauer's *The Art of Controversy* with the purpose of improving his debating skills." [45] In fact, as we have shown, Service does not have the evidence to support this claim.

Why is this matter important? Service implies that Schopenhauer's arguments provide a key to understanding the development of not only Trotsky's polemical style, but also his allegedly aggressive and domineering personality. Roaming far from Ziv's actual text and offering his own bowdlerized interpretation of Schopenhauer, Service misrepresents the philosopher as an advocate of an array of unscrupulous debating ploys and tricks. "Victory, crushing victory," declaims Service, "was the only worthwhile objective." The philosopher, according to Service, "went on to declare that the ideas of 'ordinary people' counted for nothing." [45]

Service finally declares: "Schopenhauer *did not belong* to the regular armature of Russian revolutionary thought, and Lëva Bronstein did not *openly acknowledge* his influence on his techniques of argument. *Yet he probably found* much that he needed for his politics and personality in *The Art of Controversy*." [45, Emphasis added]

So, in the end, what are we really left with? Service's claim that Trotsky discovered in Schopenhauer a philosophical justification for his alleged contempt for humanity and poisonous polemics is based on assumptions, suppositions and guesses unsupported by facts.

If we assume, for the sake of argument, that Trotsky read – nay, studied with great care – Schopenhauer's *Art of Controversy*, that does not tell us whether he agreed or disagreed with it; what he accepted and what he rejected. Trotsky read many things as a youth, including, as he tells us in *My Life*, the writings of John Stuart Mill. Yet no one would accuse Trotsky of being an admirer of British empiricism and liberalism. Finally, Service seems to assume that Trotsky's alleged study of *The Art of Controversy* could only have had malign consequences. In the opinion of this reviewer, it is more likely that Trotsky, if he had read *The Art of Controversy*, might have found in this pamphlet material that proved later to be of assistance in exposing the calumnies, distortions, half-truths and lies of his many unscrupulous enemies. Indeed, one suspects that Stalinism taught Trotsky far more than Schopenhauer on the subject of dishonest polemics.

Trotsky and Sokolovskaya

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The relentless efforts to malign Trotsky backfire, and cast Service himself in a very unflattering light. He appears to be organically incapable of feeling any sympathy whatever for the many emotional injuries and traumas endured by his subject in the course of a life dedicated – or, to use the words of his first love and wife, Alexandra Sokolovskaya, consecrated – to the revolutionary cause. Even when dealing with the plight of the 19-year-old Lev Davidovich, imprisoned and in solitary confinement, Service's attitude is contemptuous and sneering. For example, he quotes from a deeply moving letter that Trotsky wrote to Sokolovskaya in November 1898. The young man is consumed by loneliness and suffers from insomnia. He confesses that he has contemplated suicide, but then reassures Alexandra that he is "extraordinarily tied to life." And what is the response of Robert Service? He writes: "There was showiness and immaturity in these sentiments. He was a self-centered young man." [52]

Eventually Trotsky and Sokolovskaya marry and are sent into Siberian exile. They have two children. Trotsky's reputation as a brilliant young writer brings him to the attention of the major leaders of Russian socialism. Anxious to expand the scope of his activity in the revolutionary movement, the young man resolves to escape from Siberian exile. In his autobiography, Trotsky writes that Sokolovskaya encouraged him in this decision.

But Service, without presenting any evidence that contradicts Trotsky's narrative, declares: "This is hard to take at face value. Bronstein was planning to abandon her in the wilds of Siberia. She had no one to look after her, and she had to care for two tiny babies on her own with winter coming on." Service brings his diatribe to a climax with an utterly vulgar comment: "No sooner had he fathered a couple of children than he decided to run off. Few revolutionaries had left such a mess behind them." [67] Service, contradicting himself, concedes that Trotsky "was acting within the revolutionary code of behavior." [67] But he then asserts, "Even if Alexandra really did give her consent, Lev showed little appreciation of the sacrifice he had asked of her. 'Life,' he said as if it were a simple matter of fact, 'separated us.' In reality, he had chosen to separate himself from his marital and parental responsibilities." [67]

Aside from the libelous character of this allegation, contradicted by everything that is known about the realities of revolutionary struggle, it is hard to imagine a more anachronistic approach to the writing of history. Service presumes to judge the behavior of revolutionaries in late 19th century Russia, who were engaged in a struggle to the death against the tsarist autocracy, with the hypocritical standards of a wealthy, conservative and self-satisfied upper-middle class philistine in modern-day Britain.

Let us, by the way, note that Service cuts off Trotsky's sentence before its conclusion. "Life separated us," Trotsky wrote, "but nothing could destroy our friendship and our intellectual kinship." (13)

The enduring character of the profound friendship and mutual solidarity of Trotsky and Sokolovskaya was confirmed by the latter in discussions with Eastman in the 1920s. Alexandra never betrayed that friendship, for which she ultimately paid with her life. Stalin murdered her in 1938. Service makes this cold and contemptuous comment on her tragic fate: "Her troubles started with a short-lived marriage contracted to keep her and Trotsky together in Siberia – and it was in Siberia that she finally expired." [431]

Service's treatment of the tragic fate of Trotsky's daughter Zina, who committed suicide in Berlin in January 1933, is callous and malicious. He writes, "Trotsky coped with the tragedy by blaming everything on Stalin and his treatment of her." He continues:

This accusation, frequently repeated in accounts of Trotsky, was ill aimed. Zina had spent all the time she had wanted in Sukhum; it had been Trotsky who summoned her abroad and not Stalin who had deported her – and it had been Trotsky with whom she wanted to live. Trotsky's attempt to politicize the death was not his finest moment. [386]

Service chooses not to quote from the letter Trotsky wrote to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on January 11, 1933, less than a week after his daughter's suicide. He does not inform his readers that Zina was unable to return to Russia, where her husband, daughter and mother still lived, because the Stalinist regime had revoked her Soviet citizenship. As Trotsky wrote, "Depriving her of her citizenship was only a wretched and stupid act of vengeance against me." (14)

Determined to discredit Trotsky in any way possible, Service absolves the Stalinist regime of any responsibility for the death of his daughter. And this is despite the fact, as Service knows full well, that Stalin would, within just a few years, murder Trotsky's first wife, his sons, his brothers and his sister, and even his in-laws.

A Shameful Episode

Despite the considerable length of this review, it has left much unsaid. A comprehensive refutation of all of Service's distortions and misrepresentations would easily assume the size of a substantial book. This reviewer will leave for another time the exposure of Service's political falsifications as well as his persistent defense of Stalin against Trotsky. In this regard, another important issue that remains to be explored is the significance of the Trotsky biographies of Thatcher, Swain and Service as manifestations of the confluence of neo-Stalinist falsification and traditional Anglo-American anti-Communism. Indeed, a striking feature of the on-going campaign against Trotsky is the degree to which it draws upon the lies and frame-ups of the Stalinists.

There is one final issue that needs to be raised, and that is the role of Harvard University Press in publishing this biography. One can only wonder why it has allowed itself to be associated with such a deplorable and degraded work. It is difficult to believe that Service's manuscript was subjected to any sort of serious editorial review. There are still, or so one would like to believe, professors in Harvard's Department of History who can distinguish serious scholarship from trash.

There was a time when Harvard was justly proud of its role as archivist of the closed section of Trotsky's papers, which it guarded under lock and key – in accordance with the instructions of Trotsky and Natalia Sedova – for nearly 40 years. The Houghton Library considered these papers to be among its historically significant collections. In 1958, Harvard, on its own initiative, published the diary that Trotsky kept in 1935. The publisher's foreword noted respectfully that Trotsky "is to many today one of the heroes of our time." A half-century later, it provides its imprimatur for a slanderous and slovenly work. Is Harvard today, in a period of political reaction and intellectual decay, atoning for its earlier displays of principles and scholarly integrity? Whatever the reason, Harvard University Press has brought shame upon itself. One suspects that at some point in the future, with the recovery of morale and courage, it will look back upon this episode with great regret.

Notes:

1. "Science and Style," in *In Defense of Marxism* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 233. [return]

2. *Russian Review*, Volume 14, No. 2 (April 1955), pp. 151-152. [return]

3. See *Defend The Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, by Christopher Andrew (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), and *Spycatcher*

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by Peter Wright (New York: Penguin, 1987). [return]

4. See *Leon Trotsky and the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification*, by David North (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2007) [return]

5. It should be noted that Service hews closely to the line developed previously by Geoffrey Swain, who complained that Trotsky has been viewed as "a far greater thinker than he was in reality. Trotsky wrote an enormous amount and, as a journalist, he was always happy to write on subjects about which he knew very little." [3] It must be also be noted that Service, in his 2004 biography of Stalin, dealt far more respectfully with the Soviet dictator and mass murderer. "Stalin was a thoughtful man," Service wrote, "and throughout his life tried to make sense of the universe as he found it. He had studied a lot and forgotten little. … He was not an original thinker nor an outstanding writer. Yet he was an intellectual to the end of his days." See Fred Williams' review of Service's *Stalin: A Biography* in the *World Socialist Web Site*. [return]

6. In opposition to the proponents of "*Proletcult*" in the early 1920s, Trotsky argued that the proletariat, as an oppressed class, cannot create its own culture. The culture of the future, which will emerge on the basis of a far higher development of the productive forces, when there is no need for a class dictatorship, "will not have a class character. This seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this." [Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005, p. 155] [return]

7. *My Life*, p. 84. [return]

8. Ibid, pp. 86-87. [return]

9. Ibid, p. 87. [return]

10. *The Young Trotsky*, pp. 12-13. [return]

11. *My Life*, p. 363. [return]

12. *The Young Trotsky*, p. 21. [return]

13. *My Life*, p. 133. [return]

14. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932-33* [New York: Pathfinder, 1972], p. 80. [return]

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