Historians in the Service of the “Big Lie”: An Examination of Professor Robert Service’s Biography of Trotsky

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We are publishing here a lecture delivered by David North on December 13 at the Friends Meeting House in London. North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site *and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US). The lecture develops North’s critique of Service’s falsifications, initially discussed in the review,* “In the Service of Historical Falsification: A Review of Robert Service’s Trotsky: A Biography”.

It has been reported in the *Evening Standard* that at the public launching of his new biography of Leon Trotsky at Daunt Books in London’s Holland Park, on October 22, Professor Robert Service declared: “There’s life in the old boy Trotsky yet—but if the ice pick didn’t quite do its job killing him off, I hope I’ve managed it.”

One might reasonably wonder what type of historian—indeed, what type of man—would describe his own work, and with evident satisfaction, in such a manner. Is it really the aim of a serious biographer to carry out the literary equivalent of an assassination? Every possible interpretation of this statement speaks against Mr. Service. Leon Trotsky was murdered, and in a particularly gruesome and horrible manner. The blunt side of an alpenstock was driven by the assassin into Trotsky’s cranium. His wife, Natalia, was nearby when it happened. She heard the scream of her companion of 38 years and, when she ran into his study, saw blood streaming down over his forehead and eyes. “Look what they have done to me,” Trotsky cried out to Natalia.

The death of Trotsky was felt by many as an almost unendurable loss. In Mexico City, 300,000 people paid tribute to him as his funeral cortège made its way through the streets of the capital. A private letter written by the American novelist, James T. Farrell, provides a sense of the traumatic impact of Trotsky’s assassination. “The crime is unspeakable. There are no words to describe it. I feel stunned, hurt, bitter, impotently in a rage. He was the greatest living man, and they murdered him, and the government of the United States is even afraid of his ashes. God!” [1]

A serious biographer of Trotsky would not joke about the “ice pick.” It is a despicable icon of political reaction. Mr. Service would, perhaps, protest that his biography has “assassinated” Trotsky only in the sense of bringing an end to all interest in and discussion of this particular individual. But is this a legitimate ambition? A genuine scholar hopes that his work contributes to, rather than stifles, the development of the historical discussion. But this was clearly not the intention of Mr. Service. As he told the *Evening Standard*, he hopes that he will achieve with his biography what Stalin failed to accomplish through murder—that is, to “kill off” Trotsky as a significant historical figure. With this aim in mind, one can only imagine how Service approached the writing of this biography.

Service’s remark at his book launch seems to reflect a state of mind that is fairly widespread in the reactionary milieu within which he circulates. A review of the biography written by the right-wing British historian Norman Stone, an admirer of Margaret Thatcher and Augusto Pinochet, is entitled “The Ice Pick Cometh.” Another glowing review, written by the writer Robert Harris and published in the London *Sunday Times*, congratulates Service for having “effectively, assassinated Trotsky all over again.”

This is the language of people who are very troubled—both personally and politically. Seventy years after Trotsky’s death, they are still terrified by the spectre of the great revolutionary. The very thought of the man evokes homicidal images. But do they really believe that Mr. Service’s book can accomplish what was beyond the power of Stalin’s totalitarian police state? That Mr. Service and his admirers can even entertain such a thought exposes how little they understand of Trotsky and the ideas to which he devoted his life.

Leon Trotsky—the co-leader of the October Revolution, opponent of Stalinism, and founder of the Fourth International—was assassinated by an agent of the Soviet secret police, the GPU, in August 1940. The last 11 years of his life had been spent in exile. Living on what he called “a planet without a visa,” Trotsky moved from Turkey, to France, to Norway and finally, in 1937, to Mexico. The years between his expulsion from the USSR and his arrival in Mexico had witnessed a ferocious growth of international political reaction: the coming to power of Hitler in Germany, the strangulation of the revolutionary movements of the working class in France and Spain by the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies under the banner of the “Popular Front,” and the orchestration of the Moscow Trials and ensuing Great Terror that physically exterminated virtually all the representatives of Marxist politics and socialist culture in the USSR.

The first of the Moscow Trials, whose 16 defendants included historic leaders of the Bolshevik Party such as Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, was held in August 1936. The defendants were accused of plotting assassinations and various acts of terrorism. Not a single piece of evidence was produced at the trial, other than the confessions of the accused. All were sentenced to death by the tribunal. The defendants’ appeals were denied within a few hours of the trial’s conclusion, and they were executed on August 25, 1936. Though not present, the chief accused were Leon Trotsky and his son, Leon Sedov. From his exile in Norway, Trotsky vehemently denounced the trial as “one of the biggest, clumsiest and most criminal plots of the secret police against world opinion.” [2]

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Under pressure from the Soviet regime, the social-democratic government of Norway interned Trotsky in order to prevent him from continuing his public exposure of Stalin's murderous frame-up of the Bolshevik leaders. For nearly four months he was held incommunicado, virtually cut off from any contact with the outside world, while the Stalinist regime broadcast its lying denunciations of him. The Norwegian confinement did not end until December 19, 1936 when Trotsky was placed aboard a freighter bound for Mexico, whose government had granted him asylum.

The last message that Trotsky wrote before his departure was to his eldest son, Lev Sedov. Not knowing what awaited him on the voyage to Mexico, Trotsky informed Lev that he and his younger brother, Sergei, were his heirs, entitled to whatever royalties accrued from his writings. Trotsky noted that he had no other possessions. His letter ended with a poignant request to Lev Sedov: "If you ever meet Sergei," wrote Trotsky, "tell him that we have never forgotten him and never will forget him for a single moment." [3] But Lev Sedov was never to see or speak with his younger brother again. Sergei was executed, on Stalin's orders, on October 29, 1937. Nor was Lev ever to be reunited with his father and mother. He died on February 16, 1938, the victim of an assassination carried out by agents of the Soviet secret police.

Trotsky and Natalia Sedova arrived in Mexico on January 9, 1937. They lived as guests of Diego Rivera in his famous "Blue House" in Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City. Trotsky immediately threw himself into the struggle to expose Stalin's frame-ups. The second trial of Old Bolsheviks was about to begin. This time there were to be 21 defendants, including Yuri Pyatakov and Karl Radek. In a speech filmed on January 30, 1937, which is easily viewed today on the internet, Trotsky declared:

Stalin's trial against me is built on false confessions, extorted by modern Inquisitorial methods, in the interests of the ruling clique. *There are no crimes in history more terrible in intention or execution than the Moscow trials of Zinoviev-Kamenev and of Pyatakov-Radek.* These trials develop not from communism, not from socialism, but from Stalinism, that is, from the irresponsible despotism of the bureaucracy over the people!

What is now my principal task? To reveal the *truth*. To show and to demonstrate that the true criminals hide under the cloak of the accusers. [4]

Trotsky issued a call for the establishment of an international commission of inquiry to investigate and pass judgment on the charges made by the Soviet regime. He pledged to present to this commission "all my files, thousands of personal and open letters in which the development of my *thought* and my action is reflected day by day, without any gaps. I have nothing to hide!" Trotsky declared that there was not a stain on his honor, either personal or political.

Within less than three months, on April 10, 1937, the commission was convened in Coyoacán under the chairmanship of the renowned American philosopher, John Dewey. Immense pressure had been brought to bear by the Stalinists and their legions of liberal friends—including luminaries such as Lillian Hellman, Malcolm Cowley and Corliss Lamont—to prevent the formation of the commission, and, when those efforts failed, to sabotage the proceedings. For one week, Trotsky testified before the commission, answering scores of questions relating to the allegations made by the Stalinist regime. No one who witnessed him testify, hour after hour, ever forgot the experience. James T. Farrell, who observed the proceedings, recalled in later writings the overwhelming moral force of Trotsky's presence.

His final oration, delivered in English and lasting more than four hours, left the commissioners deeply moved. "Anything I can say will be an anti-climax," Dewey remarked upon the conclusion of Trotsky's speech. [5] In December 1937, the Dewey Commission issued its findings. Trotsky was declared "Not Guilty" and the proceedings in Moscow were found to be a "frame-up."

The findings of the Dewey Commission represented a great moral victory for Trotsky. But the powerful momentum of political reaction had not been exhausted. Within the Soviet Union, Stalin's police were murdering more than 1,000 people every day. In Spain, the victory of Franco was being assured by the counter-revolutionary politics of the Communist Party and the homicidal frenzy of Stalin's secret police. Paralyzed by the betrayals of the Stalinists, the European working class was unable to stop the spread of fascism and the movement toward war. Trotsky concentrated his energies on the founding of the Fourth International. "The world political situation as a whole," he wrote in early 1938, "is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." [6]

The Stalinists countered Trotsky's efforts by escalating their violence against his closest co-thinkers and supporters. In July 1937, Erwin Wolf, one of Trotsky's political secretaries, was murdered in Spain. Two months later, Ignace Reiss—who had defected from the GPU, publicly denounced Stalin and declared his allegiance to the Fourth International—was assassinated in Switzerland. In February 1938, the GPU killed Sedov. And in July 1938, Rudolf Klement, the secretary of the Fourth International, was kidnapped in Paris and murdered.

Despite this reign of Stalinist terror, the Fourth International held its founding conference in September 1938. In a speech recorded one month later, Trotsky declared that the aim of the Fourth International "is the full material and spiritual liberation of the toilers and exploited through the socialist revolution." He scoffed at the terror of the Soviet bureaucracy. "The hangmen think in their obtuseness and cynicism that it is possible to frighten us. They err! Under blows we become stronger. The bestial politics of Stalin are only the politics of despair." [7]

Less than two years of life remained for Trotsky after the founding of the Fourth International. His intellectual creativity and political far-sightedness were undiminished. Not only did he recognize the inevitability of a second world war, Trotsky predicted that Stalin would attempt to extricate himself from the disastrous consequences of his international policies by seeking an alliance with Hitler. Trotsky's analysis was confirmed with the signing of the Stalin-Hitler Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939. But Trotsky also warned that Stalin's treachery would not spare the Soviet Union from the horrors of war. It would be only a matter of time before Hitler hurled his military forces against the USSR.

During the final months of his life, with war already raging in Western Europe, Trotsky defended the historical perspective of socialism in the face of widespread skepticism and despair. He did not seek to reassure wavering followers with predictions of imminent revolution.

Rather than offering a prediction, Trotsky posed a question: "Will objective historical necessity in the long run cut a path for itself in the consciousness of the vanguard of the working class; that is, in the process of this war and those profound shocks which it must engender, will a genuine revolutionary leadership be formed capable of leading the proletariat to the conquest of power?"

He recognized that the many defeats suffered by the working class had created widespread skepticism as to its revolutionary capacities. There were many who shifted blame for these defeats away from the political leaders and onto the shoulders of the working class itself. For those who believed that past defeats "proved" that the working class was incapable of taking and holding state power, the historical condition of mankind could only appear hopeless. But against that perspective of despair and demoralization, Trotsky advanced another: "Altogether differently does

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the case present itself to him who has clarified in his mind the profound antagonism between the organic, deep-going, insurmountable urge of the masses to tear themselves free from the bloody capitalist chaos, and the conservative, patriotic, utterly bourgeois character of the outlived labor leadership." [8]

Trotsky did not expect to survive the war. He assumed that Stalin would spare no effort to kill him before the Soviet Union was drawn into open conflict with Nazi Germany. In the early morning hours of May 24, 1940, a Stalinist assassination squad, led by the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, penetrated the villa in which Trotsky and Natalia were living. Sheldon Harte, a Stalinist agent working inside the compound, had unlocked the gates of the villa. The Stalinist hit men made their way into the bedroom of Trotsky and Natalia and unleashed a barrage of machine gun fire. Almost miraculously, the two survived the assault. But Trotsky knew that the May attack would not be the last. He understood better than anyone else the danger that he confronted. "In a reactionary epoch such as ours," he stated, "a revolutionist is compelled to swim against the stream. I am doing this to the best of my ability. The pressure of world reaction has expressed itself perhaps most implacably in my personal fate and the fate of those close to me. I do not see in this any merit of mine: this is the result of the interlacing of historical circumstances." [9]

On August 20, 1940, Trotsky was assaulted by a GPU agent, and died the next day of the injuries that he had suffered. He was 60 years old.

Several months after the assassination, Max Eastman wrote a final tribute to Trotsky. It was published in, of all places, the prestigious bourgeois journal, *Foreign Affairs*. Eastman had known Trotsky very well for almost 20 years. He had written Trotsky's biography and translated into English many of his most important works, including *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Eastman was not an uncritical admirer of Trotsky. Their relationship had been marked by periods of sharp conflict. During the last years of Trotsky's life, Eastman repudiated his radical inclinations, definitively rejected Marxism and moved ever more sharply to the right. When Trotsky and Eastman met in Mexico for the last time, in February 1940, it was not as comrades but as old friends who had become somewhat estranged. At this point, neither man was interested in attempting to persuade the other of the correctness of his own position.

The fact that Eastman was no longer politically connected to Trotsky endows his final tribute with exceptional probative value. His memorial essay, entitled "The Character and Fate of Leon Trotsky," began as follows:

Trotsky stood up gloriously against the blows of fate these last fifteen years—demotion, rejection, exile, systematized slanderous misrepresentation, betrayal by those who had understood him, repeated attempts upon his life by those who had not, the certainty of ultimate assassination. His associates, his secretaries, his relatives, his own children were hounded to death by a sneering and sadistic enemy. He suffered privately beyond description but he never relaxed his monumental discipline. He never lost his grip for one visible second, never permitted any blow to blunt the edge of his wit, his logic or his literary style. Under afflictions that would have sent almost any creative artist to a hospital for neurotics and thence to the grave, Trotsky steadily developed and improved his art. His unfinished life of Lenin, which I had partially translated, would have been his masterpiece. He gave us, in a time when our race is woefully in need of such restoratives, the vision of a man.

Of that there is no more doubt than of his great place in history. His name will live, with that of Spartacus and the Gracchi, Robespierre and Marat, as a supreme revolutionist, an audacious captain of the masses in revolt. [10]

These words provided a sense of the enduring significance of Trotsky's life. Eastman was telling his readers that Trotsky would still be remembered, in 2,000 years, as one of the great fighters for human freedom.

But here we are, 70 years after Trotsky's assassination, in the midst of a politically reactionary and intellectually dishonest campaign to deprive him of "his great place in history." The publication of Robert Service's biography of Trotsky is a milestone in this campaign of historical distortion and falsification, whose stated aim is the discrediting of the actions and ideas of this key figure in modern history.

Before proceeding to a review of Service's *Trotsky*, it is necessary to make a few preliminary remarks about the treatment of Trotsky by historians both within and outside the USSR. Of course, within the USSR during Stalin's dictatorship, Trotsky was totally anathematized. From the early 1920s, the political struggle waged by the rising Soviet bureaucracy against Trotsky proceeded first and foremost on the basis of the falsification of history—of the history of the development of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, the protracted conflict between its Bolshevik and Menshevik factions, the role of different tendencies and individuals in that generally heated struggle, and, finally, of the October Revolution. Trotsky's role in the latter event, and in the civil war that followed, was so immense that the campaign to discredit him, which began in earnest in 1923, required the systematic falsification of history.

The campaign of lies began in 1923-24 with the charge that Trotsky "underestimated the peasantry." This absurd allegation, which reflected pre-1917 programmatic differences as well as emerging disputes within the Soviet state over economic and foreign policy, set the stage for a generalized attack on Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which had provided the strategic foundation for the Bolshevik conquest of state power and its goal of world socialist revolution. The fight against Trotsky reflected the repudiation of the internationalist program of the October Revolution by a bureaucracy increasingly focused on the defense of its social privileges within a national framework. Thus, there existed a symbiotic relationship between the ever more vindictive denunciation of Trotsky's supposed heresies—supported by the misrepresentation of pre-1917 factional conflicts between Trotsky and Lenin—and the promulgation of the program of "socialism in one country." The lies that began in 1923 led to tragic consequences. As Trotsky wrote in 1937, the judicial frame-ups of the Moscow Trials had their source in supposedly "minor" historical distortions.

Even after the exposure of Stalin's crimes in 1956, the Soviet bureaucracy desperately resisted Trotsky's historical and political rehabilitation. Even if it no longer claimed, officially, that he had been in league with the Gestapo, the Soviet regime and its allies defended and supported the struggle against "Trotskyism" that had been waged by Stalin in the 1920s. The systematic falsification of Trotsky's role in the history of Russian socialism, in the leadership of the October Revolution, in the creation of the Red Army and its victory in the Civil War, and, above all, in the fight against the Soviet bureaucracy, continued—even up until the dissolution of the USSR. Mr. Service claims that Gorbachev ordered Trotsky's posthumous rehabilitation in 1988. [p. 2] This is just one of Professor Service's innumerable errors. Trotsky was never officially rehabilitated by the Soviet government.

Outside the USSR, the treatment of Trotsky was very different. The role played by Isaac Deutscher's trilogy—*The Prophet Armed, Unarmed* and *Outcast*—in reawakening interest in Trotsky is well known. But it must be noted that Deutscher's recounting of Trotsky's extraordinary life found a receptive audience within a broad spectrum of scholars who, though usually hostile to Marxism, accepted as an indisputable fact his gigantic role in the history of the 20th century. Thus, even an historian as unfriendly to Trotsky's ideas as Richard Pipes, could bring himself to admit, in a review of Deutscher's "magnificent" second volume: "Personal courage and intellectual honesty Trotsky undoubtedly possessed, in sharp contrast to the other contenders for Lenin's mantle

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who were cowardly and deceitful to a remarkable degree." [11]

The growing appreciation of Trotsky's role in Soviet history was not, by any means, attributable solely to Deutscher's biography. The work of other important historians writing in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s contributed to a significant deepening of the understanding of Russian revolutionary history and Trotsky's role within it. Of particular significance was the work of scholars such as E. H. Carr, Leopold Haimson, Moshe Lewin, Alexander Rabinowitch, Richard Day, Pierre Broué, Robert V. Daniels, Marcel Liebman and Baruch Knei-Paz.

Significantly, a fundamental change in the treatment of Trotsky became apparent in the last years of the USSR and in the aftermath of its dissolution. First, within the USSR, as the crisis of the Stalinist regime mounted, it was inevitable that the old historical falsifications would lose credibility. This process, one might have expected, would work to the advantage of Trotsky's historical reputation. Certainly, in the aftermath of 1956, dissident elements hungered for whatever information they could find about him. However, from the 1970s on, the movement of the Soviet intelligentsia was to the right. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which paid little attention to the left-wing opposition to Stalinism, became the leading text of the dissident movement. This opposition did not reject Stalinism as a perversion of Marxism; rather, it rejected Marxism and the entire revolutionary project. Thus, within the "dissident" literature of the 1970s and early 1980s, the treatment of Trotsky was markedly hostile.

Emphasis was generally placed not on his opposition to Stalinism, but rather on the alleged continuity between Trotsky's policies and those implemented by Stalin after Trotsky had been expelled from the Communist Party and exiled from the USSR. This tendency became particularly pronounced during the era of Gorbachev, when, for the first time, genuine historical documents relating to Trotsky's role, including some of his books, became available. As if to counter the favorable impression these documents and books would make on a public that was asking whether an alternative had existed to Stalin and Stalinism, the new opposition to Trotsky assumed the form of unfavorable commentaries on his personality. Another increasingly common form taken by anti-Trotskyism in the last years of the USSR, and in the immediate aftermath of its dissolution, was a heavy-handed and overtly anti-Semitic emphasis on Trotsky's Jewish origins.

The reactionary environment of political triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Stalinist regime was reflected no less sharply in the treatment of Trotsky outside the former USSR. A campaign was initiated to undermine and even destroy the historical image of Trotsky as the representative of an historical alternative to Stalinism. In the early 1990s, the University of Glasgow sponsored the publication of the *Journal of Trotsky Studies.* As soon became clear, the purpose of this journal was to discredit Trotsky by claiming that his historical reputation was undeserved, that it was based on an all-too-uncritical acceptance of a narrative based on Trotsky's writings. These writings, it was claimed, were self-serving and even false. The chief target of this attack was Trotsky's autobiography, *My Life*, which had achieved, over many decades, recognition as a masterpiece of twentieth century literature.

Every facet of Trotsky's career—as it had been presented in his autobiography and in the works of other historians—was challenged. Trotsky led the October insurrection? No, he spent the crucial night of the Bolshevik seizure of power attending to insignificant secretarial functions. Trotsky led the Red Army to victory? No, he was a vainglorious poseur, who liked to strut around in military dress. Trotsky opposed the bureaucracy? No, he was an inveterate factionalist and trouble-maker who simply loved to argue.

The principal specialist in this sort of rewriting of history was Ian Thatcher, who served as co-editor of the *Journal of Trotsky Studies* at the University of Glasgow, before moving on to Leicester University and then to Brunel University in West London. Thatcher's career has been almost entirely based on creating a new school of anti-Trotskyist falsification. The climax of his efforts in this sphere was his writing of a biography of Trotsky that was published by Routledge in 2003. There is no need for me to spend time on Thatcher's work today, as I have already written an extensive analysis of this miserable compendium of distortions and lies. He is relevant to today's discussion only as the precursor and principal inspirer of Robert Service's biography. Mr. Service pays special tribute to Thatcher in his preface. "Ian," he writes, "has spent his career writing about Trotsky; I appreciate his generosity of spirit in scrutinizing my draft and making suggestions." [p. xx] Indeed, Ian Thatcher's "spirit" pervades Service's biography. Claiming that his work exposes Trotsky's "evasive and self-aggrandizing" autobiography, Service's basic approach is borrowed entirely from Thatcher.

In introducing his book, Service describes it as "the first full-length biography of Trotsky written by someone outside of Russia who is not a Trotskyist." [p. xxi]

What is meant by the term "full-length"? Merely that it is long? Generally, the term "full-length biography" implies not merely the length of a book, but, rather, its breadth and depth. Every important biography examines its subject in the context of the epoch in which he or she lived. It not only recounts the actions of the individual, but also examines the origins and development of his or her thought. It strives to uncover and explain the influences, objective and subjective, that shaped the subject's emotional and intellectual characteristics. The Service biography does none of these things—and not merely because its author is pathologically hostile to his subject (though that is, indeed, a serious handicap). The fact is that Mr. Service simply does not know enough about the life and thoughts of Trotsky. Far too little time and intellectual effort went into the preparation of this book for it to be anything else than a piece of hack-work.

The genuine scholar who possesses the necessary knowledge, audacity and even, perhaps, foolhardiness to attempt a "full-length" biography of a major historical figure imposes immense demands upon himself. The biographer must be prepared, to the extent that it is possible, to recreate in his or her own mind the life of the subject. To undertake such a project is, more often than not, extremely taxing on the biographer, often requiring years of study, research and writing. It is both intellectually and emotionally demanding—both for the author and for those with whom he lives and works. That is why so many historians include in their prefaces or forewords expressions of gratitude to their wives or husbands, children, friends and colleagues who provided intellectual, moral and emotional support.

One might cite as an example of this process the writing of the biography of G. V. Plekhanov by Professor Samuel Baron. Many years after the publication of this book in 1963, Baron wrote an essay in which he described the ordeal through which he had passed. The project had begun in 1948, when Baron chose to make an aspect of Plekhanov's work the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Its completion required four years. But Baron decided that this dissertation was too narrowly focused to be worthy of publication; and so

with scant appreciation of the implications I resolved to write a full-scale biography. Because the sources were so voluminous, the subject so complex, and my free time so limited, it required eleven years to see the plan through. During these years, although I was burdened with a heavy teaching load and had a home and family to care for, Plekhanov was rarely out of my mind. I spent many an evening during the teaching year, as well as weekends, holidays and vacations, in research and writing… My sleeping as well as my waking hours were often filled with reflections and refractions of my subject. The task I had set myself seemed so interminable that sometimes I wondered out loud whether it would finish me before I finished it. Yet there could be no thought of quitting, for I had

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too much invested, and so I continued doggedly at my Sisyphean labor. [12]

How long did it take Professor Service to research and write his biography of Trotsky? His previous large volume, a rambling and inchoate work entitled *Comrades: A History of World Communism*, was published in 2007. Before that, Service brought out, in 2004, a biography of Stalin. I will not discuss the quality of either work, other than to state, quite briefly, that both were abysmally bad. But let us leave that problem for some other time. What interests us here is that Service has brought out his "full length" biography of Trotsky only two years after the publication of his *History of World Communism*. At that point, judging from the content of the earlier volume, Service's knowledge of Trotsky's life was very limited. The references to Trotsky are of a desultory character and include a number of glaring factual errors. He gets the date of the first attempt on Trotsky's life by David Alfaro Siqueiros wrong. It occurred in May 1940; but Service writes that it took place in June. Even more astonishingly, he gets the date of Trotsky's death wrong.

But only two years after the publication of *Comrades*, Service's *Trotsky* has hit the bookstores. Consider what is involved in writing a biography of Trotsky. His political career spanned 43 years. He played a major role, as chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, in the 1905 Revolution. In 1917, after returning to Russia and joining the Bolshevik Party, Trotsky again became the chairman of the Petrograd Soviet. He also became the chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee, which, under Trotsky's direction, organized and led the October 1917 insurrection that brought the working class to power. He became, in 1918, the Commissar for Military Affairs, and, in that position, played the leading role in the organization and command of the Red Army. Between 1919 and 1922, Trotsky was, alongside Lenin, the most influential political figure in the Communist International. Beginning in late 1923, with the formation of the Left Opposition, he emerged as the central figure in the struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. After his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1929, Trotsky inspired the formation of the International Left Opposition and, between 1933 and 1938, elaborated the theoretical and programmatic foundations of the Fourth International.

In addition to the immense scope of his political and practical activities, Trotsky was among the most prolific writers of the 20th century. It has been estimated that a complete collection of his published writings would run well over 100 volumes. Even today, a substantial portion of his writings, including letters and diaries, has not been published or translated into English. The point is that the writing of a serious, full-length, biography of Trotsky is a task that would require years of rigorous work by a conscientious scholar.

Moreover, the biographer would have to be deeply knowledgeable of the historical and social environment within which his subject lived, and with the political and theoretical premises that formed the foundations of his outlook. Professor Service makes a major point of the fact that his biography has not been written by a Trotskyist, and refers disparagingly to the late Pierre Broué, who was politically affiliated to the Trotskyist movement, as an "idolater." Aside from the fact that Broué was, quite apart from his political commitments, an outstanding historian, there is a very good reason why his personal involvement with socialist politics, like that of Deutscher (who was not a Trotskyist) was a significant advantage in the writing of a biography of Trotsky. Both Broué and Deutscher possessed, even before they set to work, a genuine familiarity with Marxist and socialist culture, acquired over many decades of political involvement.

Service possesses none of the qualifications required to write a biography of Trotsky. One must allow that the lack of personal involvement in the Marxist movement need not be an absolute barrier to the writing of such a biography. Indeed, it may allow a degree of scholarly "detachment," which a politically committed historian might find more difficult to attain. But Professor Service is neither detached nor politically uncommitted. Since he has chosen to describe the late Broué as an "idolater," Service can be described, with far greater justification, as a "hater." And hate, particularly of the subjective and vindictive character that so obviously motivates Service, is incompatible with genuine scholarship. Moreover, there is still one more failing that disqualifies Mr. Service as a biographer and historian—and that is an utter lack of intellectual integrity and curiosity.

I have already written a lengthy critique of Professor Service's biography that was circulated widely in November at the annual conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). Several thousand specialists in the field of Russian history were in attendance. A significant number of historians received and read my critique. In subsequent discussions, a few of these historians have expressed some degree of disapproval of its harsh tone. But no one has challenged or contradicted me on a single issue of fact.

This published critique, "In the Service of Historical Falsification," ran well over 10,000 words. One might ask oneself: what more is there to say about Service's book? The truth is, my initial critique barely scratched the surface of Professor Service's falsifications, distortions, half-truths and outright lies.

I do not intend today to simply repeat the points that I have already raised. But I will resume my enumeration of Professor Service's distortions by returning to the issue that plays so central a role in his biography of Trotsky—that is, Trotsky's Jewish origins. As I stated in my earlier review: "There is, to be blunt, something 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." [13] As I noted, his descriptions of Trotsky are rife with ethnic stereotyping (e.g., 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…" "…he was far from being the only Jew who visibly enjoyed the opportunities for public self-advancement…" "his real nose was neither long nor bent" and so on).

Among Service's favorite techniques is to present openly anti-Semitic attitudes without citation, such as, "Jews indeed were widely alleged to dominate the Bolshevik Party." Alleged by whom? The deliberate use of the passive voice to present a position without a citation that properly identifies the source allows Service to introduce an anti-Semitic slur without assuming any responsibility for it. This is not an innocent mistake. There are definite rules that govern scholarly work. Service, who has worked for decades as a professional historian, violates these rules deliberately and repeatedly.

I would like to call attention to another example of Service's efforts to emphasize Trotsky's Jewish origins to which I have not previously referred. And that is his persistent reference to the young person as "Leiba Bronstein." Service writes that "Trotsky was Leiba Bronstein until the age of twenty-three when he adopted his renowned pseudonym." [p.11] And, so, for the first 40 pages of Service's biography, he refers to the young man only as "Leiba." Finally, on page 41, Service announces a major turning point. "Leiba," already eighteen and increasingly involved in revolutionary activity, has made new acquaintances in the provincial town of Nikolaev: Ilya Sokolovski, Alexandra Sokolvskaya and Grigory Ziv. They were Jews, Service writes, "but they did not talk, read or write in Yiddish. Moreover, they had Russian first names and liked to be called by very Russian diminutives: Ilya as Ilyusha, Alexandra as Sasha, Shura or

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Suruchka and Grigori as Grisha. Leiba, wanting to be like them, decided that he wanted to be known as Lëva [Lyova]. Semantically it had nothing to do with the Yiddish name Leiba; but it was a common first-name and helpfully it sounded a little the same." [pp. 41-42]

This story of the transformation of Leiba into Lëva reinforces a central theme of Service's argument: that Trotsky was ashamed of his Jewish origins and even sought to downplay them in his autobiography (one of the examples of its "serious inaccuracies"). So Service would have his readers believe that he has uncovered the real story whereby little "Leiba Bronstein" —the son of the "plucky Jew" David Bronstein—became Lyova Bronstein, and, somewhat later, Lev Trotsky.

An interesting story, but is there any truth in it? In his autobiography, Trotsky remembers that he was called, from his earliest childhood, Lyova. In *My Life*, a footnote written by the translator, Max Eastman, states: "Trotsky's full and original name was Lev Davydovich Bronstein, his father's name being Davyd Leontiyevich Bronstein. 'Lyova' is one of the many similar diminutives of Lev, which literally means 'Lion.' In English and French usage, Trotsky has become known as Leon, in German as Leo." [14]

Service offers no documentary evidence that the young boy was ever called anything other than Lyova, or related diminutives, such as "Lyovochka." The Bronstein family did not speak Yiddish—the language used at home was a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian—so there is no apparent reason why he would have been called Leiba.

So what about Service's story of the young "Leiba's" adoption of the name Lëva so that he could have a Russian-sounding first name like his friends? For this story Service does provide a footnoted reference to two items: 1) a bitterly hostile memoir written by Grigory Ziv, who had been one of the young Trotsky's earliest associates in the revolutionary movement; and 2) a letter written by the young Trotsky in November 1898 to his love, Alexandra Sokolovskaya.

A reader would reasonably assume that these documents provide the factual substantiation of Service's story. Most readers, however, would have neither the time nor means to access the original documents. Neither document exists in English. Ziv's book, published in 1921, is available in a few libraries in the original Russian. The letter to Sokolovskaya, which is also in Russian, exists on microfiche in the archives of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University.

However, an examination of these documents has yielded the not entirely surprising discovery that they include absolutely no information that corroborates Service's story. The first chapter of the Ziv memoir, in which his initial contacts with the young Trotsky are recounted, is entitled "Lëva." It says nothing at all about Trotsky changing his first name from "Leiba" to "Lëva" or Lev. The young man he met was known as Lëva. The name "Leiba" does not appear, even once, in the memoir. Inasmuch as Ziv discusses at length the change in his former comrade's last name—from Bronstein to Trotsky (which occurred when the young revolutionary escaped from exile and apparently took the name of a former jailer)—there is no reason to believe that Ziv simply forgot the name Leiba. Ziv did not write about it because he had never heard Lëva referred to by that name.

What about the second document cited by Service, the letter of November 1898 from Trotsky to Alexandra Sokolovskaya? This is an intensely personal and intimate letter, from a young man to a woman with whom he is deeply in love. This letter is an important document, to which Service refers on several occasions. Does the young Trotsky, in this very personal letter, explain to his love how he came to adopt the name Lëva? The answer is: No! There is nothing at all about such a transformation. The letter, by the way, is signed "Lëva," the name by which he had been known his entire youth.

So until Professor Service is able to produce proper documentation for his story about the transformation of "Leiba" into "Lëva," we are entitled to assume that he simply, and quite dishonestly, made the whole thing up.

The issue of Trotsky's original name is of both historical and political significance. It is well known that references to Trotsky as Bronstein, a name that he had not used since 1902, became increasingly common in the mid-1920s as the Stalinist bureaucracy intensified its campaign against the Left Opposition. References to Trotsky as Bronstein (and to Zinoviev as Radomyslsky and Kamenev as Rosenfeld) became part of the stock-in-trade of the Stalinists. During the Moscow Trials, Trotsky drew attention to the anti-Semitic sub-text of the proceedings, in which so many Jews were among the defendants. Curiously, many bourgeois liberals of Jewish origin in the United States, including the politically prominent Rabbi Stephen Wise, denounced Trotsky for calling attention to this aspect of the trials. This willingness to maintain a polite silence on the anti-Semitic stench emanating from the Kremlin reflected the indulgent attitude of liberals toward Stalinism during the era of Popular Frontism.

Decades later, during glasnost in the 1980s, and continuing after the dissolution of the USSR, Trotsky's Jewish origins assumed obsessive dimensions among a wide variety of Russian anti-Semites. As the eminent historian Walter Lacqueur has pointed out: "…it would be wrong to underrate the real hatred for Trotsky among sections of the Russian Right and neo-Stalinists. He was the personification of all evil, and he was doubly vulnerable as a Communist and a Jew; his 'original name,' Leiba Bronstein, was always stressed with loving care by his enemies, a practice that had once been the monopoly of the Nazis. No one would have dreamed of referring to Lenin as Ulyanov, to Gorky as Peshkov, or to Kirov as Kostrikov." [15] In a footnote, Lacqueur writes that Trotsky's childhood name was Lyova.

In a number of meetings related to the book launch of the biography, Professor Service has been questioned about his treatment of Trotsky's Jewish background. Rather than explain his approach in a professional manner, Service has replied aggressively, as if threatening a lawsuit: "Are you calling me an anti-Semite?" Only Service and, perhaps, his closest associates know what his innermost feelings about Jews are. But that is not the issue. An individual who, for whatever reasons, appeals to, arouses, and exploits anti-Jewish prejudice is *practicing* anti-Semitism. That Service may include Jews among his personal friends is beside the point. It is a well known historical fact that Karl Lüger—the founder of the anti-Semitic Christian Socialist Party and mayor of Vienna in fin-de-siècle Austria—had a number of Jewish friends. For Lüger, anti-Semitism was merely a political device to rally the embittered Viennese petty bourgeoisie to his politically reactionary banner. When asked to explain how he reconciled his anti-Semitic demagogy with his genial dining engagements with Jews, Lüger replied cynically: "In Vienna, I decide who is a Jew." Professor Service practices similar moral double bookkeeping.

One final point on this matter. In his 2004 biography of Stalin, Professor Service made a point of absolving Stalin of the charge of anti-Semitism. He cites a comment that Stalin made at the conclusion of an early congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party. Stalin, noting that a higher percentage of Jews was to be found among the Mensheviks than among the Bolsheviks, remarked that "It would do no harm if we, the Bolsheviks, carried out a small pogrom in the party." Service, with remarkable indulgence, observes that Stalin's remarks "were later used against him as proof of anti-Semitism. They were crude and insensitive. But they scarcely betokened hatred of *all* Jews… For many years into the future he would be a friend, associate and leader of countless Jews." [p. 77, Emphasis added] What an extraordinarily generous explanation of Stalin's attitude toward Jews! Inasmuch as he did not hate *all* Jews, and

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even included Jews among his friends, Stalin was not an anti-Semite! By the way, it should be noted that Service's citation of Stalin's remarks at the RSDLP conference left out the following passage: "Lenin is outraged that God sent him such comrades as the Mensheviks. What kind of people are they, really? Martov, Dan, Axelrod—circumcised Jews… Do Georgian workers really not know that the Jewish people are cowardly and no good for fighting?" [16]

The central purpose of Service's biography—and in this he is continuing where his mentor, Ian Thatcher, left off—is to discredit Trotsky not only as a political figure, but as a man. To some extent, Service's concentration on Trotsky's personality is dictated by the fact that the biographer has sufficient sense to realize that he lacks the intellectual equipment to deal with Trotsky's ideas. It is easier to attack Trotsky personally, to misrepresent his actions and his motives.

Service's portrayal of Trotsky has been welcomed by innumerable right-wing critics. For example, Robert Harris has written in the London *Times*: "If one can imagine the most obnoxious middle-class student radical one has ever met—bitter, sneering, arrogant, selfish, cocky, callous, callow, blinkered and condescending—and if one freezes that image, applies a pair of pince-nez and transports it back to the beginning of the last century, then one has Trotsky."

I would imagine that most of the adjectives employed by the overheated Mr. Harris would serve very well as a description of his own person.

The real purpose of Service's grotesque portrayal of Trotsky—which reverberates throughout the bourgeois press and will eventually be echoed in subsequent pseudo-historical works that dutifully cite Professor Service's "authoritative" and "magisterial" volume—is the concoction of an entirely new historical persona. All traces of the real Trotsky—as he was described and remembered by comrades and friends, and, above all, as found expression in his words and his deeds—are to be effaced, obliterated and replaced with something monstrous and grotesque that bears no resemblance to the real human being. The historical persona of the great revolutionary, political genius, military leader and master of the written word is to be replaced with something abominable and contemptible. Trotsky, á la Service, as one of the political monsters of the twentieth century! This is what Service and his friends have in mind when they talk of his book as a second assassination of Trotsky!

But because the concoction grossly falsifies reality, the author loses himself in countless contradictions. The book begins, oddly enough, with a fairly honest and objective summary of Trotsky's role in the Russian Revolution. Service writes, in the opening paragraph:

Trotsky moved like a bright comet across the political sky. He was the finest orator of the Russian Revolution. He led the Military-Revolutionary Committee which carried out the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October. He did more than anyone to found the Red Army. He belonged to the Party Politburo and had a deep impact on its political, economic and military strategy. He was a principal figure in the early years of the Communist International. The whole world attributed the impact of the October Revolution to his partnership with Lenin. [p.1]

Within little more than a page, however, Service sets to work repudiating his opening paragraph. Trotsky, he tells us, "exaggerated his personal importance. His ideas before 1917 were nowhere near to being as original and wide-ranging as he liked to believe. His contribution to the Bolshevik advance on power was important but not to the degree that he asserted."

The two assessments are not compatible with each other. If Trotsky did all that Service states that he did in the first paragraph of the biography, then how could Trotsky have "exaggerated his personal importance"?

After the first paragraph, Service piles insult upon insult, indifferent to the accumulation of obvious absurdities and contradictions. There are times when he even manages to make a declaration in one sentence that he proceeds to contradict in the same paragraph! "Leiba," he writes, "had no compunction about living at his father's expense while despising his hopes and values." The two sentences that follow immediately after read: "The son, furthermore, was as stubborn as his father. He would no longer be told what to do, and rather than submit to the paternal will he fled his comfortable apartment and took up residence in Shvigovski's house." [p. 41] Thus, contrary to what Service declared in the first sentence—that "Leiba had no compunction about living at his father's expense"—the reader learns in the third sentence that the young man gave up the comforts of home in order to pursue his ideals!

Service claims repeatedly that Trotsky edited drafts of his autobiography in order to remove material that might prove embarrassing to him. In fact, he does not provide a single example of such an excision. Quite the opposite. Service notes that in an early draft of the autobiography, Trotsky recounts a story in which he displayed exceptional personal and physical courage in defying a cruel and sadistic prison warden. Trotsky told the warden to his face that he would not tolerate his abusive comments. It was the warden who retreated. In the published version of *My Life*, this story—for which there were witnesses—was not included.

Service comments: "As with several such episodes of daring in his life, Trotsky did not include this information in his published memoirs. It had to be dragged out of him by admiring writers. Although he liked to cut a dash in public, he disliked boasting: *he preferred others to do the job for him. He was noisy and full of himself. People did not have to wait long before discovering how vain and self-centered he really was*." [p. 56, Emphasis added]

Through a rather clumsy sleight of hand, Service finds a way of insulting Trotsky for his modesty and dislike of boasting!

Service devotes an enormous amount of space to blackguarding Trotsky as a faithless husband who cruelly abandoned his first wife and their two children. "As a husband," writes Service, "he [Trotsky] treated his first wife shabbily. He ignored the needs of his children especially when his political interests intervened. This had catastrophic consequences even for those who were inactive in Soviet public life—and his son Lev, who followed him into exile, possibly paid with his life for collaborating with his father." [p. 4]

One would hardly guess, based on Service's telling of the story, that either the oppressive conditions of Tsarist Russia or, later, the persecutions of Stalin had anything to do with the tragic fate of Trotsky's family and loved ones. In fact, Service actually criticizes Trotsky for assigning responsibility to the Soviet regime for the death of his daughter Zina in 1933.

But the circumstances of the deaths of his children and his first wife are of little interest to Service. What interests him is portraying Trotsky as some sort of irresponsible and callous philanderer, who thoughtlessly and egotistically abandoned his first wife, Alexandra Sokolovskaya.

Service treats the relationship between Trotsky and Alexandra Sokolovskaya with a truly offensive crudeness. Repeatedly, he attempts to drag both the young Lyova and Alexandra down to his own level.

In this regard, Service's use of the letter of November 1898—to which I have already referred—is especially significant. This letter was written by the 19-year-old Lyova to Alexandra while they were both imprisoned in Odessa. They could not communicate with each other in person. When Lyova wrote this letter, he was ill and depressed. Nearly a year had passed since they had been arrested. Trotsky had spent several months of imprisonment in solitary confinement.

Citing a brief passage from this letter, in which Trotsky admits that he had thought of, and rejected, suicide, Service comments:

There was showiness and immaturity in these sentiments. He was a self-centered young man. Unconsciously he was trying to induce Alexandra to do more than love him: he wanted her to understand and look after him and perhaps this could be achieved by admissions of weakness. He was never genuinely suicidal: his comment was designed to make her want to

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protect him. He saw that he had been haughty and unfeeling towards her. What better, then, than to own up to possessing a stony exterior and to say that he was 'shedding tears' about this. [p. 52]

This sort of facile psychologizing is, even when offered with the best of intentions, of rather dubious value. But it assumes a maliciously absurd character when the passage upon which the analysis hinges has been falsified. Trotsky, Service tells us, is slyly attempting to appeal to Alexandra's vulnerability by insincerely confessing that he was "shedding tears" about his "stony exterior."

The problem with this "interpretation" is that Service has misrepresented the text of Lyova's letter. The exposure of this falsification requires that the relevant passage be fully and correctly quoted. The young revolutionary wrote:

Sasha [Alexandra] is so good, and when I feel like kissing and caressing her so much…. And all that is beyond reach: instead, there is loneliness, insomnia, repulsive thoughts about death … brrr .. The hour of redemption will arrive, 'The people will sing their hymn, They will remember us with tears. They will visit our graves.' Our graves, Sasha: our g-r-a-v-e-s. – O, with what horror will they speak at some time about today's social order … beyond my doors right now at this very moment I can hear the familiar clang of so many chains: after all they are on people. Sasha, how much we have become used to this, and yet how terrible it is. Chains on people … And this is all according to the law. Are you surprised by my burst of 'Weltschmerz'? An unusual sensitivity is developing in me: I have become capable of 'shedding tears' while reading the civil poems of P. Ya /in 'Mir B.'/ or while reading works of fiction … It's simply that my nerves are extremely strained, that's all. The Siberian taiga will temper this tender civic sensitivity. On the other hand, how happy we will be there. Like Olympian gods. We will always, always be inseparably together.—How many times I have always repeated this, and yet I feel like repeating it over and over again … You and I have gone through so much together, we have suffered so much that, to be sure, we deserve our hour of happiness.

This letter is, in its own right, an extraordinary and deeply moving document. That its author was the future leader of the October Revolution imparts to it immense significance. To interpret this letter as an expression of "showiness" and "immaturity" speaks to Service's cynicism and insensitivity. However, from a professional standpoint, Service's treatment of this letter is dishonest and misleading.

First of all, Trotsky's admission to "shedding tears," which he places in quotation marks, does not refer to his weeping about his efforts to conceal his "stony exterior." Rather, it refers directly to his response to the poetry of Pyotr Yakubovich. Were Service a serious historian, he would—after having carefully reflected on this matter—explain to his readers the significance of this reference. Yakubovich (1860-1911) was an important poet and revolutionary, active in the populist People's Will. His poems, which evoked the heroism and tragedy of the doomed struggle of the revolutionary terrorists against tsarism, made a deep moral impact upon the youth of the 1890s. The images employed by Yakubovich in his poetry, particularly those of death and sacrifice, are evoked by Trotsky in his letter to Alexandra. She, of course, would have understood these references very well. A conscientious historian would find in this complex letter—from which I have cited only a small section—valuable material for developing an understanding of his subject and his times. But Service is simply not interested.

An odor of indifference and laziness pervades the entire volume. The author shows no curiosity at all about the sources of Trotsky's intellectual and artistic creativity. Service's comments on Trotsky's early literary efforts, written during his first Siberian exile, are generally so banal and perfunctory that it seems that their only purpose is to provide the author with the page count he requires in order to advertise his biography as "full-length." A typical example of Service's talent for producing penetrating intellectual commentary is his remark that Trotsky "adored French novels, was an admirer of Ibsen and was impressed by Nietzsche. *He treated them all as examples of contemporary world culture*." [p. 207, emphasis added] Did he really? Who would have imagined? But there is something here that does not seem quite right. The reference to Nietzsche raises doubts. The reader may be tempted to wonder: what was it about Nietzsche that impressed Trotsky?

If the critical reader is in a position to investigate the issue, he might discover an essay, written by Trotsky shortly after the death of Nietzsche in 1900, entitled "Something about the Philosophy of the 'Overman.'" Upon reviewing this essay, the reader will quickly learn that "impressed" is hardly the word that describes the young Trotsky's response to Nietzsche. Trotsky saw in the latter's philosophy of the "overman" a justification for a new and ever more powerful social type: the

financial adventurists, 'overmen' of the stock exchange, political and newspaper blackmailers sans scruple, in short, that entire mass of parasitical proletariat which has tightly attached itself to the bourgeois organism and in one way or another lives—and usually lives quite well—at society's expense without giving back anything in return. … But the entire group (rather numerous and ever growing) still needed a theory which would give the intellectually superior the right to 'dare.' It awaited its apostle and found him in Nietzsche.

Trotsky concludes his essay with the observation that the social soil from which Nietzscheanism emerged "has turned out to be decayed, malignant and infected…" [17]

Does it still appear that Trotsky was "impressed" with Nietzsche? Or is it not more likely that Service did not bother to read Trotsky's essay, and simply does not know what he is talking about. With Service, as with others of his type, intellectual dishonesty goes hand in hand with ignorance and charlatanry.

As I have previously noted, an exhaustive review of all the errors and false statements that appear in this volume would require a "full-length" book at least as long as Service's biography. It is not an exaggeration to state that there is hardly a page in which an informed reader will not find passages that are objectionable from the standpoint of the basic standards of historical scholarship. It is not even possible to accept, without direct investigation, the author's references and citations. Again and again it emerges that the source material cited by Service does not support his claims.

In bringing this review to a conclusion, it is appropriate to return to Service's treatment of the relationship between Trotsky and Alexandra Sokolovskaya. The distortion of the circumstances of their separation plays a major role in Service's effort to discredit Trotsky—as a husband, a father, and as a man. All the reviewers in the right-wing British press have picked up the theme with enthusiasm.

In discussing the circumstances of his first escape from Siberian exile in 1902, Trotsky wrote in *My Life:*

At that time we already had two daughters. The younger was four months old. Life under conditions in Siberia was not easy, and my escape would place a double burden on the shoulders of Alexandra Lvovna. But she met this objection with the two words: "You must." Duty to the revolution overshadowed everything else for her, personal considerations especially. She was the first to broach the idea of my escape when we realized the great new tasks. She brushed away my doubts.

For several days after I had escaped, she concealed my absence from the police. From abroad, I could hardly keep up a correspondence with her. Then she was exiled for a second time; after this we met only occasionally. Life separated us, but nothing could destroy our friendship and our intellectual kinship. [18]

Service, who does not actually quote Trotsky's statement, writes:

He [Trotsky] later made the claim that Alexandra had wholeheartedly blessed his departure. This is hard to take at face value. [p. 67]

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On what basis is this statement made? Service does not produce a single piece of evidence—documents, letters, personal testimony—that contradicts Trotsky's account, which, it should be stressed, was written in 1929 when Alexandra was still alive. She did not contradict it, even though—given the fact that Trotsky had been exiled from the Soviet Union and was publicly reviled as the greatest enemy of the Soviet people—the Stalinist regime would have welcomed her personal denunciation of her former husband.

Service employs a series of loaded phrases to cast Trotsky's actions in the worst possible light: "Bronstein was planning to abandon her in the wilds of Siberia… No sooner had he fathered a couple of children than he decided to run off." [p. 67] Service, however, proceeds to discredit his own unsubstantiated claims by acknowledging that Trotsky "was acting within the revolutionary code of behavior. The 'cause' was everything for the revolutionaries. Marital and parental responsibilities had an importance but never to the point of preventing young militants from doing what their political conscience bade them to do." [p. 67] If that were the case, as Service acknowledges explicitly, then on what grounds can he claim that Trotsky's statement that Alexandra supported, and even proposed, his escape from exile "is hard to take at face value"?

The fact is that Service's condemnation of Trotsky's action is not based on an honest appraisal of the historical context within which the two young revolutionaries lived. One must add that Service's reference to Alexandra being "abandoned" is maliciously motivated conjecture. As a matter of historical fact, there is good reason to believe that efforts were made to provide assistance for Alexandra and the children. Indeed, in a later chapter, Service includes material that indicates that the Bronstein family played a significant role in providing support for Trotsky's children. During a trip to Western Europe to visit Trotsky in 1907, Trotsky's parents brought his daughter Zina with them. Service notes that Trotsky's family "lived a complicated existence. Zina at that time lived with his [Trotsky's] sister Elizaveta and her husband in their family home on Gryaznaya Street in Kherson. Alexandra wrote regularly to them." [p. 108]

So it seems that Trotsky did not "abandon" his family. As revolutionaries, both Lev Davidovitch and Alexandra Lvovna coped as best as they could in exceedingly difficult circumstances. At some point in the future, as more documents are discovered, it may be possible to reconstruct accurately the details of their complicated personal arrangements. But Robert Service will not be the man who undertakes that assignment.

Finally, with regard to the personal relation between Trotsky and Alexandra, there is a document that testifies to their deep and enduring bond of comradeship and friendship. It is a letter written by Alexandra to Trotsky on August 8, 1935. The final act of the terrible human tragedy is about to begin. Alexandra addresses the letter to "Dear Lyova." She tells Trotsky of the difficult conditions that confront different members of their family. Alexandra includes, in a reference to efforts by Trotsky to provide material support for her, "I am very touched, as always, by your thoughtful attitude toward me." And she closes the letter, "Love and Embraces, Yours, Alexandra." [19]

Lev Davidovitch Trotsky and Alexandra Lvovna Sokolovskaya were extraordinary human beings, the representatives of a revolutionary generation whose capacity for self-sacrifice, in the interest of the betterment of mankind, seemed to know no limits. How pathetic it is for Professor Service and his ilk to believe that he will succeed, with insults, falsifications and slanders, in dragging these titans down to his miserable level.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years*, by Alan M. Wald (New York University Press, 1978), p. 87. [return]
2. Ibid, p. 413. [return]
3. Ibid, p. 502. [return]
4. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37* (New York, Pathfinder, 1978), p. 179. [return]
5. *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, Report of Hearings on the Charges Made Against Him in the Moscow Trials, by the Preliminary Commission of Inquiry (Merit Publishers, New York, 1968) p. 585. [return]
6. *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, (New York, Pathfinder, 1977) p. 137. [return]
7. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938-39*, (New York, Pathfinder, 1974) pp. 93-94. [return]
8. *In Defense of Marxism*, (London, New Park, 1971) p. 15. [return]
9. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, (New York, Pathfinder, 1973) p. 299. [return]
10. *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 19, No. 2 (January 1941, p. 332). [return]
11. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (July 1960), p. 904. [return]
12. *My Life With G.V. Plekhanov*, p. 188. [return]
13. "In the Service of Historical Falsification: A Review of Robert Service's *Trotsky: A Biography*," Mehring Books (Oak Park, 2009), p. 15. [return]
14. *My Life*, (New York, Pathfinder, 1970) p. 3. [return]
15. *Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), pp. 59-60. [return]
16. Cited in *Stalin*, by Hiroaki Kuromiya (London: Longman, 2005), p. 12. [return]
17. L. Trotskii, *Works*, Series 6, Volume 20, Culture of the Old World, M.-L., State Publishing House, 1926. 147-162. (New translation from the original Russian text) [return]
18. *My Life*, p. 132-133. [return]
19. *Trotsky's Diary in Exile 1935*, (New York, Atheneum, 1963) pp. 159-160. [return]

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