

Much further reading required: Trotsky: A Graphic Biography, by Rick Geary

Kevin Martinez
13 January 2010

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the life and thought of Leon Trotsky, particularly among the youth.

In response, a number of deplorable biographies have appeared, including those by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher, and, of course, Robert Service's recent volume, which resembles character assassination rather than an effort at historical truth. This type of work has preemptive political motives; it is aimed at turning readers away from revolutionary politics.

Behind the revived popular interest in Trotsky lie objective processes. The ongoing crisis of capitalism and worsening conditions for masses of people, on the one hand, and the failure of Stalinism (and other "national roads to socialism"), on the other, are propelling many people to look for political alternatives to the status quo.

Any serious search for an alternative to both the present system and Stalinism inevitably brings up Trotsky's name. This holds true for the artist too. But then what? How to approach his life as biographic material in a serious and honest manner is one thing. How to make his life into remarkable art is another. Is the life of Leon Trotsky suitable for a graphic artist to work on? Certainly, but even the best-intentioned artist has to take great care in answering the questions bound up with such material.

Graphic novels, or comic books, have until recently, not been taken very seriously as an artistic medium. Given the fact that a number of graphic novels have served as the basis for poor or insubstantial films (i.e., *From Hell*, *Sin City*, *Watchmen*, etc.), this is understandable. Fortunately, there are many cartoonists and illustrators who take art and life more seriously. Rick Geary, an award-winning cartoonist from Kansas City, Missouri, is among them.

Geary previously illustrated a graphic series entitled *A Treasury of Victorian Murder*, and in 2008 created *J. Edgar Hoover: A Graphic Biography*. His most recent work, *Trotsky: A Graphic Biography*, concerns the life and times of the twentieth-century Russian revolutionary. Despite the book's wonderful drawings, however, the work as a whole is somewhat disappointing.

The volume contains 100 pages of black-and-white images against a stark white background. Geary does not shade in his drawings, but instead utilizes straight lines to create the illusion of depth and perspective. The layout of the pages is also impressive; Geary will utilize different images within each panel on a single page to give the book an almost kinetic feel. Considering the demanding life of Leon Trotsky, this gives the work an exciting and almost breathless character.

Many maps are included to illustrate Trotsky's travels or enforced exiles; there are also drawings of the prisons where he was held and the towns and cities in which he lived. A panel depicting the Bloody Sunday atrocity in January 1905, in which tsarist military units killed more than a thousand unarmed demonstrators in St. Petersburg, touching off the first Russian revolution, is done with sensitivity and simplicity.

One scene, which could have been taken directly out of Trotsky's *My Life*, showing the latter and Lenin sharing a brief rest in a empty room immediately following the October Revolution, is also memorable. Another image contrasts Stalin with a profile of Napoleon Bonaparte, and in the following panel Geary has Trotsky hanging onto a pendulum swing, signifying the ebbs and flows of his fortune. The last panel, revealing Trotsky's grave in Coyoacán, Mexico, is somber, yet not sentimental.

All this is done with a certain degree of sympathy for the protagonist, but most likely Geary's intention was to let the reader come to his or her own conclusion, which is not entirely a good thing considering the not-so-neutral text that accompanies Geary's images. The artistic strengths of *Trotsky* notwithstanding, too much of the text borders on simplistic summaries of Trotsky's ideas, or worse. In fact, it contains some misleading and false conceptions.

The first panel of the book is inspired by a famous Bolshevik propaganda poster that depicts Trotsky atop a white horse as St. George slaying the dragon of "capitalist repression." In contrast, the following panel—an anti-Semitic poster from the counter-revolutionary White Army—represents Trotsky as a devil sitting on top of a mound of human skulls.

Geary holds these images up as two conflicting notions of Trotsky, one heroic and the other evil. Geary then writes, "In truth he fitted neither of these images." And so he establishes the theme of the book: Trotsky was a towering historical figure, but also partially responsible for his own demise. This is rather philistine—"Trotsky had a good side and a bad side," in other words—and doesn't get us very far at all. In fact, it is an evasion of the complex historical and ideological issues.

On page 41, Geary describes Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution in the following manner: "He knew that Russia's revolution would be generated and sustained by the industrial workers in the nation's urban centers. But their numbers would not be enough to keep it safe from counterrevolution which would most likely come from the backward and unreliable peasantry...the solution would be to spread the revolution westward across Europe in a never-ending tide until it covered the globe!"

This doesn't capture Trotsky's conception, which began from *world-historical* processes and the interests of the *international* working class. As a Marxist of great originality and insight, he did not derive the world revolution from national needs and conditions, as the above formulation suggests, but, on the contrary, he drew out the specific character of the Russian revolution from global developments. Ironically, the nationally centered notion outlined in Geary's book has more in common with Menshevik and Stalinist conceptions than with Trotsky's perspective.

Having said that, Geary's work as a whole could serve as an adequate *introduction* to younger people who are curious about Trotsky's life and ideas. As a work of art, it is not bombastic like most graphic novels and it does give some sense of who Trotsky was—but, politically, a good deal more could have been said, especially about his key theoretical conceptions and their clear relevance to the contemporary world situation, and this is the book's greatest weakness.

This brings up the question: Does the medium of graphic novels inevitably cheapen the subjects that it is trying to represent? In this reviewer's opinion, not necessarily. The medium, which can fall prey to oversimplification and uninspired visuals, was once associated with considerable imagination and artistic daring. Anyone who doubts this should look, for example, at Winsor McCay's comic strip "Little Nemo" from the first part of the last century.

In any event, it is not an accident that much of the book's artistic life comes not from Geary's illustrations, as talented as the author is, but from Trotsky's own magnificent writings.

Thankfully, Geary includes a section entitled "Further Reading," which includes Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography of Trotsky, as well as Trotsky's own autobiography, *My Life*. However, to this reader's dismay, Geary also included anticommunist academic Richard Pipes's diatribe *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive*, as well as Ian Thatcher's recent (anti-)Trotsky biography.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact