

WSWS chairman David North addresses Sydney book launch

## In defence of Trotsky's "immense and enduring historical significance"

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*The following are the remarks made by David North, the chairman of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US) at the launching of his book, In Defence of Leon Trotsky: A Reply to the Falsifications of Robert Service, at the Gleebooks bookstore in Sydney, Australia on February 3, 2010.*

Last week Professor Robert Service spoke at an event sponsored by Foyle's Books in London. He noted that his biography of Trotsky had become the subject of a counter-campaign by the Socialist Equality Party, and that his book was being criticized at public meetings all over the world—including this one being held in Sydney, Australia. He stated: "I've had a lot of problems with Trotskyist sectarians in the last two or three months because I don't idolize Trotsky. I don't worship at the shrine of Trotsky."

We are not the only ones whom Professor Service has accused of being "idolaters". In the opening pages of his biography, he made the exact same accusation against the well-known authors of two significant biographies of Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher and Pierre Broué. Deutscher, according to Service, was the principal "idolater" of Trotsky. As for Broué, he "worshipped at Trotsky's shrine."

The use of the word "idolater" and the phrase "worshipping at Trotsky's shrine" implies that Trotsky is the object of a quasi-religious or cult-like veneration. He is an "idol"—i.e., a "false god"—worshipped by mindless pagans immune to facts and reason. This is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. It is Service who shows himself incapable of treating Trotsky as a genuine historical personage, who must be examined in the context of the times in which he lived. For Service, however, Trotsky is not a God to be worshipped, but a devil to be exorcised.

This exorcism requires that Trotsky be exposed as a monster—a man without humanity, without any redeeming features. He is cold-blooded, mean-spirited, arrogant, and egotistical; a soulless calculating machine, who is prepared to consign humanity to the flames in demonic pursuit of an unrealizable utopia. And that is not all: Service's Trotsky is an ungrateful son, contemptuous of his father's faith and material achievements. He is also a faithless husband, who casually impregnates and then deserts his first wife; an uncaring and absentee father, ultimately responsible (as a consequence of his political obsessions) for the suffering and death of his children; and a sexual libertine who (according to rumors) made advances to a well-known British sculptress and even wrote his wife a sexually explicit letter when they were both in their late fifties (which, of course, Service quotes in detail).

Trotsky, Service goes on, postured as an intellectual, writing on subjects about which he knew nothing. He was also a liar and falsifier, who wrote an autobiography from which Trotsky—in the course of several drafts—removed systematically anything that might compromise the public image that he had dishonestly constructed. Among the most important

details, according to Service, that Trotsky sought to downplay was the fact that he was Jewish.

This attempt to suppress his Jewish background was, argues Service, the key to Trotsky's life. Service presents the transformation of young "Leiba" Bronstein into the Russified "Lev" Bronstein as a critical turning point in the young man's life. Having dispensed with a hated Jewish-sounding first name, the stage was finally set for the next act of self-reinvention: the creation of Lev Davidovich Trotsky! The problem with this story, as with so much of what Service writes, is that it is without any factual foundation. The first name by which Bronstein was known from his birth was "Lev," or the diminutive, Lyova.

Service's book is a catalog of insults: Trotsky "was noisy and full of himself. People did not have to wait long before discovering how vain and self-centered he really was." "Any woman who lived with him had to accept that he would do as he pleased." "Always he wrote whatever was in his head." "Intellectually, he flitted from topic to topic and felt no stimulus to systematize his thinking." "He made no claim to intellectual originality; he would have been ridiculed if he had tried."

And though he tried to conceal his heritage, Service sees everywhere the mark of his Semitic ethnicity: Trotsky "was brash in his cleverness, outspoken in his opinion. 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 self-advancement..." As for the roots of Trotsky's attraction to Marxism, Service asserts that, "Young men and women, trained in the rigors of the Torah, found a congenial orthodoxy in Marxist intricacies. Hair-splitting disputes were common to Marxism and Judaism."

The Bolshevik Party provided a congenial home for Trotsky. "The party's leadership was widely identified as a Jewish gang," Service informs his readers, adding, for good measure: "Jews indeed were widely alleged to dominate the Bolshevik Party." But Trotsky did not conform to all Jewish stereotypes. Including in his collection of photos a grotesque Nazi caricature of "Leiba Trotzy-Braunstein," Service adds a caption that notes helpfully: "In reality, his real nose was neither long nor bent and he never allowed his goatee to become straggly or his hair ill-kempt."

Amidst all this muck, what does Service have to say about Trotsky's political ideas and his writings? The answer, in brief, is virtually nothing. Indeed, Service states emphatically that he was determined not to make Trotsky's written and spoken words, or even his public deeds, the focus of his biography. In contrast to the "idolater" Deutscher and the "shrine-worshipper" Broué, Service proclaims that "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."

What an extraordinary approach for a biographer to take—particularly of a man who was widely considered (as by Bertolt Brecht, for example) to be the greatest European writer of his time! How can a biographer

declare—and expect to be taken seriously—that what his subject did not write, say or do is as important as what he wrote, said and did?

This absurd conception, however, is central to Service's purpose, and explains the animus he bears against biographers—especially Deutscher and Broué—for whom Trotsky's vast literary output forms the essential intellectual and political foundation for an appraisal of the man. This is an approach that Service rejects—for reasons that have far more to do with concerns relating to contemporary politics than with historical method.

As Service himself acknowledges, both in his book and in a number of public statements, he has written his biography to overcome the lingering influence of Deutscher's trilogy—*The Prophet Armed*, *Unarmed* and *Outcast*—that was published between 1954 and 1963. Service does not tell us anything about his own political affiliations during the 1960s and 1970s (if I had the opportunity, I would ask Professor Service whether there was any truth to the many rumors that he was a member, or on the periphery, of the virulently anti-Trotskyist British Communist Party), but he was clearly angered, if not traumatized, by the enormous growth of Trotskyist movements during that period. It is widely and justly believed that Deutscher's biography contributed significantly to this important political phenomenon. There is no disputing the fact that Deutscher's trilogy provided thousands of radicalized youth in Europe, the United States and, may I add, Australia, with their initial introduction to the life and ideas of Leon Trotsky.

When the first volume of Deutscher's biography appeared, *The Prophet Armed*—covering the years between 1879 (the year of Trotsky's birth) and 1921 (the end of the Civil War)—Trotsky's reputation had been buried beneath the vast and monstrous edifice of Stalinist lies. There was not another figure in the twentieth century, perhaps not in world history, who had been subjected to such an unrelenting campaign of falsification and slander. The virtually unlimited resources of the Soviet regime, and of Stalinist-run parties throughout the world, were devoted to blackguarding Trotsky as an anti-Soviet saboteur, terrorist, and fascist agent. Within the Soviet Union, his political co-thinkers, past and present, were ruthlessly exterminated. The Stalinist regime killed almost every member of the Bronstein family, including Trotsky's siblings, nieces and nephews, his in-laws, and his two sons. Even before the years of mass killings, the death of Trotsky's two daughters was related to conditions created by the Stalinist regime's persecution of their father.

Trotsky was assassinated by a Soviet agent in August 1940. By then, World War II had begun. After the Soviet Union was invaded in June 1941—bringing the infamous Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939 to a bloody conclusion—western European and American intellectuals were hardly in a mood to remind themselves of Stalin's innumerable crimes against the international socialist movement. With the encouragement of the Roosevelt administration, Hollywood produced a cinematic portrayal of US Ambassador Joseph Davies' disgusting pro-Stalin account of the Moscow Trials, entitled *Mission to Moscow*. The film portrayed Trotsky as an enemy of the Soviet people.

The onset of the Cold War following the end of World War II lessened the ardor of intellectuals for Stalin, particularly in the United States. But Trotsky—as a major historical and political presence—had, by then, faded into the background.

Stalin's death in March 1953 marked the beginning of the protracted crisis and death agony of the bureaucratic regime. In 1956 Khrushchev's secret speech exposed Stalin as a mass murderer. By this time, Deutscher's first volume had been published, and it contributed enormously to a renewed interest in the life of Stalin's implacable adversary. The second volume came out in 1959 and the third in 1963. The political radicalization of youth had, by this point, begun. The reading of Deutscher's trilogy became a major generational experience.

At this point, I must speak of my own experience: I was in Washington in November 1969. A mass demonstration had been called against the

Vietnam War. By this time, virtually nothing remained of my earlier hopes that the Democratic Party represented a progressive, let alone socialist, opposition to imperialism. On the eve of the mass rally, I witnessed a demonstration outside the White House. The protestors marched around the Presidential residence holding candles in their hands. The scene struck me as utterly futile. Did the protestors really believe that the candles would awaken Nixon's conscience?

Across the street from the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue, I found a bookstore. A book attracted my attention. Its cover carried the photo of a young man, whose eyes gazed out confidently through a set of pince-nez. The book's title was *The Prophet Armed*. I bought the book, began reading it that night, and could hardly allow myself to put it down until I had completed it. That was the beginning of what was to become a life-long engagement with the life and ideas of Leon Trotsky.

Wherein lay the power of Deutscher's biography? Without question, Deutscher was a masterful writer—whose command of the English language recalls that of his great compatriot, Joseph Conrad. But Deutscher's great achievement was his re-creation—on the basis of the historical record—of Trotsky's towering revolutionary persona, as a writer, artist, orator, military leader, political strategist, socialist visionary and, yes, human being. The drama and tragedy of the October Revolution and its reflection in the life of its greatest figure found powerful expression in the pages of Deutscher's biography. However, to describe the work as an uncritical exercise in hagiography is utterly false. As a matter of fact, a substantial portion of Deutscher's biography—particularly its final volume—is devoted to an increasingly emphatic exposition of the author's deep and irreconcilable political differences with many critical aspects of Trotsky's political perspective.

Notwithstanding Deutscher's criticisms, he left his readers in no doubt of Trotsky's immense and enduring historical significance. Those who wished to understand the Russian Revolution, the twentieth century, and, beyond that, the historical destiny of mankind, had to engage themselves with the ideas of Leon Trotsky. At the end of his great work, Deutscher left his readers with the conviction that Trotsky's life represented a harbinger of a better and more humane world, a world in which the great ideals that had inspired the Russian Revolution would finally be realized. He understood Trotsky as a Promethean figure who, though overcome in his own lifetime by the overwhelming force of reaction, would find vindication in the ultimate triumph of his ideals. And Deutscher closed his biography with a quote from the final stanza from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*:

*To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.*

In the presence of these noble sentiments, so appropriate to Trotsky's life and historical role, what is left of Professor Service's petty and spiteful work?



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