Seventy years since the assassination of Leon Trotsky

David North
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Seventy years, more than two-thirds of a century, have passed since the assassination of Leon Trotsky. In political terms, this is a substantial period of time. It is a platitude to state the obvious: that so much has changed since 1940. The world of Churchill, Roosevelt and Hitler *seems*—the verb has been chosen with deliberation—to belong to a long-past era. Whether it is really so far behind us is a question that demands very serious consideration, especially when one examines the reception of Leon Trotsky by historians. Whatever else has changed in the world, Trotsky remains an extraordinarily contemporary figure. Even after the passage of 70 years, the passions evoked by his name have not subsided.

Two days after Trotsky's assassination, the *New York Times*, in an editorial that welcomed his death, wrote spitefully: "The victims of his cold cruelty … can be numbered in the millions. … It was not enough for him that Russia should be drenched in blood and suffering; the whole world had to wade through a sea of violence so that the triumph of the proletariat could be assured."

The vitriol of the editorialists who penned those lines can be understood. They feared Trotsky as the greatest revolutionary of their time. He represented a threat to their interests and way of life. They were writing about an enemy whose deeds had shaped the world in which they lived. However, the editorialists could not help but acknowledge the immense scale of their adversary's achievements:

"He was a powerful writer, an orator who could sway vast crowds, an organizer of sheer genius … It was Trotsky, newly arrived in Russia from New York's East Side, who took a nondescript, ragged mass of Russians and welded them into the Red Army. He drove every 'white' general from the soil of Russia, he broke every Allied attempt to restore the old regime, he gave a semblance of order to a transport and supply system that had been sunk in utter chaos."

Seventy years after Trotsky's death, the anger of his enemies has not subsided. In the course of the last seven years, three biographies of Trotsky, by British historians, have been published. The first, by Ian Thatcher, appeared in 2003. The second, by Geoffrey Swain, was brought out in 2005. The most recent, by Robert Service, was published, amidst great fanfare, last year. There is not a trace of historical detachment, objectivity, let alone basic honesty, in these biographies. The authors write about Trotsky as if he were a living political opponent and their personal enemy. Oddly enough, the editorialists of the *Times*, writing in 1940, for all their politically-embittered anger, were more scrupulous in their attitude toward the facts. They, at least, acknowledged the vast historical role played by Trotsky.

I have spent no small amount of time answering and refuting the books of Thatcher, Swain and Service, which are all shameless exercises in historical distortion and falsification. My essays and lectures on these three authors have been collected and brought together in a book that runs to approximately 200 pages. I am indebted to the Mehring Verlag for having produced a German-language edition of this book. I would like to be able to say that my critique was exhaustive in its refutation of Swain, Thatcher and Service. Unfortunately, I was compelled, under the pressure of time and other responsibilities, to concentrate my attention on only the most egregious of these writers' falsifications of the historical record.

I had hoped, with the publication of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, that it might be possible to take a welcome respite from the less than pleasant task of answering so-called historians who make a career of falsifying and distorting. Alas, that wish is not likely to be fulfilled. Before my coming to Germany, the comrades of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) informed me of the decidedly hostile attitude of the faculty of the Department of History at the Humboldt University to the scheduled public lecture of Professor Alexander Rabinowitch on the October Revolution. The department was unwilling to make available a suitable lecture hall, or even formally welcome Rabinowitch's presence at the Humboldt—if only by inviting him for a cup of coffee.

I was interested to discover the source of the history faculty's hostility to Professor Rabinowitch's lecture. Certainly, something more than bad manners was involved. And, as a review of the writings of members of this faculty quickly established, that is most definitely the case.

The online archive of the history faculty at the Humboldt includes a review of Robert Service's *Trotsky* by university lecturer Andreas Oberender. He is a junior member of the faculty working under the direction of Professor Jörg Baberowski. Oberender's work demonstrates, if nothing else, that the contemporary campaign to discredit Trotsky is not a uniquely Anglo-American exercise.

Oberender's enthusiasm for Service's biography knows no bounds. He joyfully welcomes Service's long-overdue demolition of the "myth" of Trotsky's world-historical significance. As if following a script written by Service himself, Oberender repeats the latter's dismissal of the renowned Trotsky biographies of Isaac Deutscher and Pierre Broué. These writers were mere "apologists" and "worshippers" of Trotsky.

In contrast, Oberender praises Service as the "ideal biographer" of Trotsky: "Completely above suspicion of any connection to Trotskyism, he possesses the required critical distance to his protagonist…" Oberender fails to consider that Service's association with the virulently anti-communist Hoover Institute at Stanford University calls into question his claim of "critical distance" and objectivity.

Despite his unqualified praise for Service's biography, Oberender has nothing concrete to say about it. He does not cite even a single sentence from this supposedly brilliant work. Instead, he devotes almost all of his review to his own vicious denunciation of Trotsky.

Oberender writes, "Without his already early apparent writing and speaking talents he would have merely remained a young revolutionary among many. He had no other means of drawing attention to himself apart from his rhetoric."

How is one to answer such a banal and absurd statement? What would one think of a biographer of Count Leo Tolstoy who wrote, “Without his talent as a writer, Tolstoy would have simply remained a wealthy landowner among many others. Had he not written *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Resurrection*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, no one would care about Tolstoy. Except for his skill as a writer, he had no means to call attention to himself.” Yes, how profoundly true!

Underlying Oberender’s diatribe against Trotsky is a bitter hatred of the socialist movement. He continues:

“Trotsky's development hardly differed from that of the typical left-wing member of the radical intelligentsia alienated by the Tsarist regime. The milieu of his socialization was the unhealthy hotbed of fractional in-fighting predominating in the circle of émigrés and editorial boards with their endless scholastic debates over the purity of the Marxist doctrine and the correct path to revolution.” Trotsky, according to Oberender, “never emerged from the suffocating influence of Russian social democracy; the reader looks in vain for any signs of candor and willingness to reach out to other intellectuals and ideological milieus.”

What astonishing ignorance! Trotsky’s activities and influence, before 1917, was not confined to the milieu of the Russian social democracy. He was a major figure in the European socialist movement, well known to all the major leaders of the Second International—including Ramsey MacDonald, the British Fabian and future prime minister. Trotsky spoke and wrote fluently in French and German. He was, at least before 1914, on close personal terms with Karl Kautsky and his articles appeared in *Die Neue Zeit*. Trotsky was considered an outstanding authority on the politics of the Balkans. As for the range of his cultural interests, not even Service denies that Trotsky wrote on a wide range of intellectual, literary and artistic trends. Trotsky wrote on subjects such as Nietzsche, Ibsen, and the European artistic avant-garde.

Oberender continues: “The adoption and reception of Marxism by the young Trotsky graphically demonstrates what happens when an undoubtedly agile and responsive intellect submits to an ideology, which walls itself within a hermetically sealed conceptual structure and recognizes reality only through the prism of rigid dogma and irrefutable truths.”

Oberender, in a manner typical of vulgar pragmatists, attempts to deride as “dogmatic” those like Trotsky who are conscious of theoretical method and who think systematically. He fails to identify the “rigid dogmas” and “irrefutable truths” that supposedly marred Trotsky’s thinking. Presumably, Oberender has in mind the entire opus of Marxist thought, its foundations in philosophical materialism, and the materialist conception of history. It does not occur to Oberender that his own assertions, laid down without supporting arguments, exemplify the sort of dogmatic thinking of which he accuses Trotsky.

Oberender goes on: “Impartial analysis and objective argumentation were not Trotsky's cup of tea; he was a master of grandiose phrases and abrasive polemics, gifted with the dubious talent of masking the most abstruse and outlandish ideas in dazzling rhetorical pomp. His stylistic excesses went hand in hand with a striking lack of substance and profundity.”

Oberender assumes that his readers are totally ignorant of Trotsky’s literary opus and the immense influence that he exerted through his writings on public opinion. Brecht said in 1931, in conversation with Walter Benjamin and Hermann Hesse, that Trotsky could be justly considered the greatest writer in Europe. And Brecht, it should be noted, was not a political supporter of Trotsky. Any professional academic capable of writing such dishonest and unadulterated rubbish forfeits all right to be taken seriously as a historian.

Trotsky’s writings on European and world politics over a period of nearly 40 years are unequaled in their perspicacity. Nevertheless Oberender continues:

“Trotsky wrote vast numbers of texts in quick succession, assuming the competence to address all manner of issues, with the result that his unrestrained urge to communicate descended into empty verbiage. Significantly, in June 1926 the Politburo called upon Trotsky to rein in his mass production of texts and concentrate more on the posts and tasks given to him by the party.”

Oberender’s sympathies are with Stalin and the rest of Trotsky’s factional opponents in the Soviet Politburo. He fails to note that the Stalinist efforts to censure Trotsky were part of an expanding campaign to silence and legally proscribe the greatest and most popular opponent of the growing bureaucracy.

Oberender descends ever lower. In a ludicrous exercise in counter-factual history, he asks: “What would have become of Trotsky if the Tsarist regime had not collapsed as a result of the First World War? He would have then had to make his way through life as a left radical journalist and aging revolutionary in waiting.”

And what, we might similarly ask, would have happened to Lincoln without the crisis of the union? He would have remained a small town lawyer. Or what would have happened to Luther without the conflict between Rome and the German princes that set the stage for the Reformation? On a somewhat more modest scale, what, one might wonder, would have happened to Frau Merkel without the fall of the Berlin Wall? Oberender asks us to consider, in essence, what would have become of Trotsky if the 20th century hadn’t happened! But, without Herr Oberender’s permission, it did happen, and he is not pleased with the results.

“In times of revolution and civil war he quit his desk in order to agitate among the masses and the Red Army to take up arms against the Whites. His rhetorical and organizational talents, together with his undoubtedly unsentimental approach to the use of violence, allowed him to quickly become one of the best known and most influential party leaders.”

In other words, in the maelstrom of war and revolution, in which millions of people became engaged in massive political struggles, Trotsky emerged as one of the great figures of world history!

Oberender now wants to undo what occurred in history. “What remains from Trotsky and his mystique?... Having read the [Service] biography there can be no doubt that on the basis of a critical examination not much remains of Trotsky's once overblown reputation. His writings belong mostly in a cabinet of curiosities, and the extravagance of his thought strikes one today, in our own non-ideological age, as strange, if not bizarre. The Fourth International he founded is barely a footnote in the history of the workers' movement.”

Mr. Oberender, I understand, was born in what was once East Germany. How would he assess today the place of the Stalinist ruling SED in the history of the workers’ movement? Or, for that matter, that of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union? What remains of these reactionary bureaucratic structures? Trotsky foretold the fate of the Stalinist parties: “Of these reactionary organizations,” he wrote, “not one stone will be left on another.”

As Mr. Oberender indulged in speculation as to what would have been Trotsky’s fate had not War and Revolution intervened, he cannot object when I pose the question: What would have happened to Mr. Oberender had the German Democratic Republic not collapsed? Frankly, I doubt that his life would have proceeded all that differently. A place would have been found for his meager talents somewhere within the academic structures of the GDR. He might have even found a place within the Humboldt University. Indeed, the review he has written of the Service biography could have been published in a Stalinist journal without a single word being changed!

Oberender claims that Trotsky’s writings belong in a cabinet of

curiosities, which have no relevance to our times. A strange verdict, coming from a historian—especially one whose specialty, supposedly, is the history of the Soviet Union. To say that Trotsky is irrelevant is tantamount to dismissing the historical significance of what must be counted among the most important events of the 20th century—the Russian Revolution. Is it possible to understand the political strategy that guided the October Revolution without reference to the writings of Leon Trotsky? No serious historian could exclude from his study of 1917 a careful reading of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, which also happens to be one of the indisputable masterpieces of world literature. Similarly, a study of Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed* remains the essential work not only for historians, but for anyone today who wishes to understand what the Soviet Union was and the origin and nature of the social, economic and political contradictions that led to its dissolution in 1991—a fate foreseen by Trotsky in 1936!

To a degree unequalled by any other writer of his lifetime, Trotsky's literary work remains extraordinarily contemporary. For all the many changes in the world over the last 70 years, Trotsky dealt with issues, processes and problems that remain with us to this day: the nature of world economy and its relationship to the nation-state; the significance and implications of the global hegemony of American imperialism; and the fragility of bourgeois democracy. Of course, Mr. Oberender does not even provide the title of a single work by Trotsky. But of all his omissions, the most troubling is his failure to even note what must be considered, at least by a German historian, among Trotsky's greatest achievements: his analysis of German fascism and his impassioned warning of the colossal menace that Nazism posed to the German and international working class.

Does Mr. Oberender believe that these writings, too, belong in a cabinet of historical curiosities? Have these no relevance to our supposedly "non-ideological" age? Even as we meet, a major exhibit on the Nazi regime has been mounted in Berlin's Museum of History. To this day, German politics and culture is scarred by the Nazi victory in January 1933 and its aftermath. But this victory was achieved by the fascists only as a consequence of the cowardly and irresponsible policies of the Social Democratic and Communist parties, which refused to unite the millions of socialist workers in Germany for a common struggle against Hitler.

Trotsky's warnings on the danger posed by fascism rank among the most prescient political documents written in the 20th century. They are all the more extraordinary for having been written by Trotsky while he lived in enforced exile in Turkey. Trotsky called for a united front of the working class against the Nazis, and denounced both the SPD's pathetic subordination to Hindenburg and the Stalinist party's criminally irresponsible identification of the Social Democracy with fascism. While the Stalinist KPD claimed, with a mixture of demagogy and terrified fatalism, that a Nazi victory would lead quickly to a communist revolution, Trotsky warned that Hitler's assumption of power would represent a political catastrophe of unimaginable dimensions.

All claims that it would have made no difference if Trotsky had emerged victorious from the inner-party struggle are refuted by the events in Germany. If no other issue had divided Trotsky and Stalin, the collision over Germany was of sufficient historical moment to justify the claim that Trotsky's defeat had the most tragic consequences.

Permit me to refer to one document written by Trotsky in April 1932, nine months before Hitler's victory. What would be the appropriate response of the Soviet government to a fascist victory? Trotsky wrote:

"…My relations with the present Moscow government are not such that I have any right to speak in its name or refer to its intentions, about which I, like every other reader and man of politics, can judge only on the basis of all the information accessible. But I am all the more free to say how in my opinion the Soviet government ought to act in case of a fascist state victory in Germany. Upon receiving the telegraphic communication of this event, I would sign an order for the mobilization of the reserves. When you have a mortal enemy before you, and when war flows from the logic of the objective situation, it would be unpardonable light-mindedness to give the enemy time to establish and fortify himself … and thus grow up to the dimensions of a colossal danger."

Does Mr. Oberender believe that these words, too, belong in a cabinet of historical curiosities?

What assessment is to be made of Leon Trotsky, 70 years after his death? We now have the advantage of historical perspective. We know the outcome of the political conflicts in which Trotsky played so central a role. We know the fate of the Soviet Union, and of the Stalinist regime that came to power on the basis of the political struggle against Trotsky.

The question must be asked: Which perspective was confirmed by subsequent historical development: the Stalin-Bukharin theory of "socialism in one country" or Trotsky's refutation of the possibility of establishing socialism on a national basis? Which perspective anticipated the trajectory of economic development: Stalin's autarkic conception of national socialism or Trotsky's insistence on the primacy of global economic processes?

The history of the Soviet Union, taken as a whole, establishes that the campaign against Trotsky and Trotskyism, which began in the Politburo in 1923, marked the onset of a right-wing and essentially Russian nationalist reaction against the revolutionary internationalist program on which the October Revolution had been based. Within little more than a decade, the expulsion of the internationalists within the Soviet Communist Party developed into an unrestrained campaign of political genocide aimed at the physical extermination of all the representatives of Marxist politics and culture within the socialist intelligentsia and working class.

The Soviet Union emerged from the anti-socialist terror of the 1930s a politically-scarred society. Stalin's campaign of mass murder, which included the destruction of virtually the entire officer corps of the Soviet Union, abetted the Nazis and facilitated their subsequent invasion. The horrifying human losses suffered by the USSR between 1941 and 1945 were attributable, to a great extent, to the impact of the Stalinist purges. The Soviet victory in World War II could not, in the long run, reverse the disastrous political trajectory of the USSR. All the frantic reform efforts of the Soviet bureaucracy, after Stalin's death in 1953, developed on the basis of the nationalist program that formed the basis of the Stalinist regime. The system left behind by Stalin staggered from crisis to crisis until its collapse less than 38 years after the dictator's death. And the form of that collapse—the dissolution of the USSR by the bureaucracy, the conversion of nationalized property into private property, and the transformation of sections of the bureaucracy into capitalist multibillionaires—proceeded along the lines anticipated by Trotsky in the 1930s.

In conclusion, I would like to address the relevance of Trotsky today. What is Trotsky's place in history? As a writer, orator, strategist of revolutionary insurrection, military leader and political thinker, Trotsky represents the summit of socialist politics and culture in the 20th century. Before 1917 Trotsky elaborated the strategy of the Russian Revolution. During the years of revolution and civil war, he personified the proletariat's will to victory. And later, in the face of political defeat and isolation, as a hunted exile, Trotsky rose to still greater political and moral heights—as the implacable opponent of the Stalinist counterrevolution and the strategist of the future world socialist revolution.

In a way unequalled by any other figure, Trotsky defined what it meant to be a revolutionary socialist in the 20th century. That Lenin was a towering figure in the history of socialism is beyond dispute. But his life and work are embedded in the Russian Revolution, with all its contradictions. His death in January 1924 came as the reaction against the October Revolution, within the party that he had created, was only beginning to unfold. In the final weeks of his conscious political life, beset

with anxiety over the fate of the revolution, Lenin—as documented in his final writings—turned to Trotsky for support. In the struggle against Stalinism, Trotsky's political work acquired a world historical significance. The Russian Revolution was a great episode in Trotsky's life—an episode in his struggle for the victory of the international working class. Trotsky personified and represented the world socialist revolution. Moreover, in the fight against Stalinism, Trotsky rescued socialism from the abyss into which it had been dragged by the Kremlin gangsters and their political accomplices.

No political tendency that calls itself socialist can define its program, can define its relationship to Marxism today, except through the political conceptions and political struggles developed by Trotsky. The Fourth International, which he founded in 1938, has endured and developed as the political expression of genuine Marxism. Seventy years after his death, Trotsky, the greatest political figure of the last century, remains the most important teacher of socialists in the new century.