European historians oppose publication by Suhrkamp of Robert Service's Trotsky biography

Wolfgang Weber
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In a letter dated July 30, 2011, to Ulla Unseld-Berkéwicz, who heads the major German publishing house Suhrkamp Verlag, 14 prominent historians, political scientists and publicists from Germany and Austria oppose the firm's planned publication of Robert Service's biography of Leon Trotsky. The *World Socialist Web Site* is today publishing this letter.

The authors and initial signers of the letter are Professor of Political Science and Contemporary History, Dr. Hermann Weber (Mannheim University) and Professor of Sociology, Dr. Helmut Dahmer (Technical University, Darmstadt).

They support the criticism of Service's biography of Trotsky set forth by David North in the book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* (published by Mehring Books, 2010). In June of this year, the American historian Bertrand Patenaude associated himself with North's critique in a review of Service's book for the prestigious *American Historical Review* (*AHR*). He agreed that the book by Service is a hastily concocted diatribe that violates the basic standards of scientific work, and that the book's publishers failed to meet professional standards of editorial care and integrity. (See "The American Historical Review discredits Robert Service's biography of Leon Trotsky".) Neither Service nor his publisher have to date responded to this criticism or rebutted it.

The letter to Suhrkamp Verlag states: "North and Patenaude have pointed out a host of factual errors by Service… Service's sources are unreliable. Sources that are very difficult to access and hardly verifiable for most readers often have nothing to do with the claims made, or demonstrate the opposite. Contrary to the announcement made by Suhrkamp, Service has not sought to deal with Trotsky and Stalin in an 'impartial and genuine' manner. Instead, the aim of his work is to discredit Trotsky, and unfortunately he often resorts to the formulas associated with Stalinist propaganda."

The authors and signatories of the letter draw special attention to the numerous passages in which Service appeals to anti-Semitic prejudices, and cite a series of direct quotations to substantiate this. Their verdict at the end of the letter to the publisher is: "We are of the opinion that the book by Service is misplaced in your highly regarded publishing house."

To great acclaim in many press organs, from both right-wing academics and ex-radical intellectuals, the biography by the Oxford professor Robert Service was published in 2009 by Harvard University in the United States and Macmillan in the UK. In 2010, it was published by Ediciones B in Spain and Latin America, and several weeks ago by Perrin in France. A forthcoming German edition by Suhrkamp was announced some time ago.

Professor Hermann Weber (83) is regarded throughout Europe as a leading figure in research into the communist movement and Stalinism in the twentieth century. From 1975 to 1993, he held the chair of Political Science and Contemporary History at the University of Mannheim. He has published numerous standard works on the history of the German Communist Party (KPD), the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the former East Germany, the Comintern, and the Stalinist terror. His book, *Geschichte der DDR* (*History of the GDR*) is still a bestseller. In his role as head of the research project "Commintern" by the German-Russian Commission of Historians at the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research and as associate editor of *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (*Yearbook for historical research on communism*), he still takes an active part in debates on science and research.

Professor Helmut Dahmer is an outstanding expert on the works of Leon Trotsky and for over 20 years has been responsible for their publication in a scholarly-critical series of 10 volumes.

One of the first additional signatories of the letter was Dr. Hartmut Mehringer. Unfortunately, this recognised expert on the socialist opposition inside the Third Reich died

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unexpectedly on October 17 of this year after an illness. Mehringer completed his doctoral thesis on the development of the theory of permanent revolution in the years 1848-1907. In the 1970s, he published works by Leon Trotsky and later held a leading position at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich and Berlin.

Other signatories are:

Bernhard Bayerlein, a lecturer at the University of Cologne and researcher at the Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam, author of numerous publications on the history of the communist movement in Germany and on Stalinism.

Heiko Haumann, professor emeritus for Eastern European and Modern History at the University of Basel.

Wladislaw Hedeler, historian and writer living in Berlin, an expert on the history of the Soviet Union.

Andrea Hurton, historian and writer living in Vienna.

Professor Mario Kessler, lecturer and researcher at the Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam. Professor Kessler began his academic career in East Germany and after reunification qualified for the second time. A focus of his research and publications has long been the theme of the workers' movement and the Jewish question.

Oskar Negt, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Hanover. As a member of the Socialist German Student Association (SDS) beginning in 1956, he was a spokesman of the extra-parliamentary opposition in the 1960s.

Professor Oliver Rathkolb, professor of contemporary history and director of the Institute for Contemporary History at the University of Vienna. He has established an international reputation for his research on the Nazi era and the political history of Austria and Europe.

Hans Schafranek, a historian in Vienna. His main focus is reflected in numerous publications on the subjects of Stalinism, Trotskyism and the Spanish Civil War.

Peter Steinbach teaches contemporary history as a professor at the University of Mannheim and is the scientific director of the German Resistance Memorial in Berlin.

Reiner Tossdorf, lecturer in East European History at the University of Mainz.

Rolf Wörsdörfer, lecturer at the Technical University of Darmstadt and specialist in the history of Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia.

As the list demonstrates, the authors and signatories represent very different political views and scientific schools of thought, but they have one thing in common: they feel a responsibility to historical truth and the defence of scientific standards in historiography.

The letter has had some effect on the publisher Suhrkamp. After it arrived, the printing of the book was postponed. In a letter to Professor Helmut Dahmer, Dr. Sparr, the representative of Frau Unseld-Berkéwicz in the management of the publishing house, wrote that the allegations are being taken very seriously and further expert opinion has been sought.

But as of today, Suhrkamp has evidently not made a decision to abandon publication. The fact that the firm has not made any detailed statement in response to the historians' factual letter, while bookstores and delivery chains have already announced delivery of the book for January 2012, suggests that they intend to publish.

Even if Suhrkamp does publish the book, the letter is a heavy blow to Robert Service and his attempt to "finish off" Trotsky as a world historical figure by means of historical falsifications and slanders, thereby committing, as hailed in the British press, "a second assassination of Trotsky."

There is no other historical figure of the twentieth century who was so hounded and vilified as Leon Trotsky. The Stalinist apparatus attacked him with historical falsifications and hate campaigns, murdered tens of thousands of his followers, and finally killed him. The anti-communists in the West angrily maligned Trotsky as well because they correctly recognised in him a principled and incorruptible Marxist and socialist.

The fact that Trotsky has become the object of ferocious attacks and slander in the twenty-first century is a testament to his contemporary relevance. Under conditions of the most profound crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s, the ruling circles fear a revival of socialist ideas. That many historians and journalists now confront these slanders and defend the historical truth is to be welcomed. The *World Socialist Web Site* is committed to fostering and enriching the reawakened interest in the person and ideas of Leon Trotsky. We will make known the historians' letter to the widest possible public and encourage the broadest possible discussion.

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In Defense of Leon Trotsky is available at Mehring Books.

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