

# Letter from historians to German publisher Suhrkamp on Robert Service's biography of Trotsky

23 November 2011

Berlin, 30 July 2011

Re: Publication of Robert Service's Trotsky biography

Dear Ms. Unseld Berkéwicz,

Your publishing company is preparing a German edition of Robert Service's biography of Trotsky. This project has provoked surprise and consternation on the part of professional historians. Trotsky expert David North undertook a thorough analysis shortly after the book was published two years ago by Harvard University Press. He came to the conclusion that Robert Service had violated basic standards of historical scholarship and his publisher had failed to exercise the necessary editorial oversight. A recent review of the book by the Trotsky biographer Bertrand Patenaude in *The American Historical Review* has completely confirmed the criticisms raised by North.

North and Patenaude have pointed out a host of factual errors by Service (including false information regarding biographical facts and historical events, incorrect names of places and persons, up to blatant misrepresentations—e.g., Trotsky's position regarding autonomy and "partiality" in art and literature). 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 of the book 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 Service biography is a pasquil. The *Evening Standard* of 23 October 2009 reports on a presentation

of the book and quotes Service as follows: "There's life in the old guy Trotsky. If the *ice pick* didn't finish him off, I hope my book does."

Trotsky's origins from a Jewish peasant family have always played a prominent role in the countless polemics against him. Service also treats these origins—which, he claims, Trotsky underplayed—as of great significance. The passages in which he deals with this theme have repugnant connotations. We quote in German translation from the original English edition:

? "Russian anti-Semites had picked out Jews as a race without patriotic commitment to Russia. By becoming the foreign minister for a government more interested in spreading world revolution than in defending the country's interests, Trotsky was conforming to a widespread stereotype figure of the 'Jewish problem'. The truth was that he would inevitably become a figure of hatred among ultra-nationalist political groups in Russia and abroad if he accepted any prominent job in the revolutionary administration. As things stood he had already become the most famous Jew on earth. America's Red Cross leader in Russia, Colonel Raymond Robins, put this with characteristic pungency. Talking to Robert Bruce Lockhart, head of a diplomatic mission in Moscow, he described Trotsky as 'a four-kind son of a bitch, but the greatest Jew since Jesus Christ'." (Robert Service, Trotsky, page 192)

? "He 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 emancipated from the traditions of their religious community and the restrictions of the Imperial order.... But he was far from being the only Jew who visibly enjoyed the opportunities for public self-advancement. In later years they were to constitute a model for Jewish

youth to follow in the world communist movement when, like communists of all nationalities, they spoke loudly and wrote sharply regardless of other people's sensitivities." (202)

? "The party's leadership was widely identified as a Jewish clique.... Jews were widely alleged to dominate the Bolshevik party." (205)

? Robert Service also believes—without providing any evidence—he has discovered that Trotsky's forename was not Lev but rather "Leiba", something that Trotsky later denied. (Amongst the book's illustrations, Service includes an anti-Semitic caricature [No. 11]. The original text accompanying the portrait reads: "War and Navy Commissar Leiba Trotsky-Braunstein...the real dictator of Russia." Service's own commentary reads: "In reality, his real nose was neither long nor bent and he never allowed his goatee to become straggly or his hair ill-kempt.")

We are of the opinion that the book by Service is misplaced in your highly regarded publishing house and ask you to reconsider your options.

Vienna, 30 July 2011

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(Technical University, Darmstadt)

Mannheim, 30 July 2011

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