

“Robert Service has written a diatribe, not a scientific polemic!”

A conversation with Professor Hermann Weber

28 November 2011

Professor Hermann Weber, aged 83, is regarded in Europe as the doyen of research into the communist movement and Stalinism. 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 Communist Party, East Germany’s ruling SED party, the Communist International, and the Stalinist terror. His book *Die DDR 1945—1990*[i] (*The German Democratic Republic 1945—1990*) is still a bestseller. A revised fifth edition has just been published. In his role as head of the “Comintern” research project, which is being conducted by the German-Soviet Historical Commission at the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, and as founder of the *Yearbook for Historical Studies on Communism*, he remains active in historical debates and research more than 18 years after his retirement as university professor. Together with Helmut Dahmer and twelve other prominent historians, Weber co-authored a letter to publisher Ulla Unseld-Berkéwicz strongly opposing the decision by the Suhrkamp Verlag to publish a German-language edition of the Trotsky biography written by Robert Service.

On behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Wolfgang Weber conducted the following conversation with him.

WSWS: *As a historian you have undertaken intensive research into Leon Trotsky and Trotskyism, but you are not yourself a supporter of the ideas of Leon Trotsky?*

Hermann Weber: Yes, that’s correct. In my youth I was a functionary of the Communist Party youth organization in West Germany, for which I landed in prison for 6 months. I had come into conflict with the party leadership as a critic of Stalinism already before my imprisonment and then, in 1954, I was expelled from the party together with my wife Gerda. During those years I concentrated on looking for political organizations which advocated socialism and fought against Stalinism from that standpoint. In the early 1950s, the then-leading members of the Trotskyist organization in Germany, such as Georg Jungclas [ii], had many conversations with me, but ultimately they could not convince me politically. When they had been active within the UAP [iii] in 1951, they had painted a too rosy picture of Titoism, which I myself regarded as just another variant of Stalinism.

After Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin’s crimes (1956), there was a sort of Trotsky renaissance in the 1960s, amidst the economic and political crisis and the rebellion by youth. This receded, however, about 10-15 years later. For several years now I have noted a renewed interest in the figure of Trotsky and his ideas, but notably also in anarchism and its representatives, such as Max Stirner. In a way both, Trotsky and Stirner, are “heretics” in comparison to the prevailing political opinions. Both criticize capitalism, albeit with different theories of society and different political perspectives. Given the global crisis of capitalism, both are now moving back more into the centre of intellectual and political interest. I deal with this phenomenon in an article for the next edition of the

Yearbook of Historical Studies on Communism. In preparing this article, I dealt extensively with the biography of Trotsky by Robert Service and the book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* [iv] by David North.

WSWS: *What was your first impression of the book of Robert Service?*

Hermann Weber: When I first heard from you about the critique undertaken by David North of Robert Service and the plans of the Suhrkamp publishing house, I thought: let Service write about Trotsky and let Suhrkamp publish whatever they want after all. But the more I read and studied, the more appalled I was by this book, not because it argues against Trotsky’s political actions and views—that everyone is indeed free to do. But Service deals in lies, falsifications of history, dubious references and even anti-Semitic prejudices. Such pamphlets should not have a place in an academic publishing house with a liberal tradition and a history such as Suhrkamp.

From a purely scientific point of view, one is struck by the incredible number of grave mistakes, blunders and misrepresentations, to begin with. The fact that Service does not get to grips with dates, that he cannot recall the correct name of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, whose assassination triggered the First World War, that he confuses the French poet André Breton with the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, that he turns upside down Trotsky’s attitude to the “Proletkult”, a tendency in art that he [Trotsky] sharply criticized—all this exposes in an embarrassing fashion the astonishingly low level of education on the part of the author and a shocking lack of diligence on the part of his publisher.

Service writes of many things which he knows little or nothing about. He presents Trotsky as an egotistical, inferior writer only capable of “superficial scribbling”. That’s just nonsense. Service here is trying to play on the ignorance of readers. As I wrote 1983 in my afterword to Trotsky’s *Diary in Exile*: Trotsky counts among the greatest political writers of his time and even his most bitter political enemies recognized him as such. It was no accident that he was nicknamed “the pen!”

WSWS: *You have written an appeal to the Suhrkamp publishing house, signed by a number of other historians and political scientists, in which you strongly objected to the publication of this book. What was the main reason for doing that?*

Hermann Weber: There are two crucial reasons. First, the book is a diatribe and not a scientific critical polemic.

Perhaps for a German edition one could, with a great deal of effort, edit out all of the factual errors and blunders. But as a whole, the book is written in a completely tendentious manner and is full of deliberate misrepresentations and distortions aimed at just one thing: to vilify Trotsky as a person, in order to convey the impression that his political actions and ideas also lack credibility. This is impossible to correct without writing a book of a different nature and with a different content.

As a historian one can and should at times write polemics, but that is just the opposite of a diatribe.

WSWS: *You yourself have authored polemics such as your work of 1964 “Ulbricht fälscht Geschichte” [v] (“Ulbricht falsifies history”) directed against the former leader of the Stalinist bureaucracy in East Germany, or at the end of the 1980s, the book “Weiße Flecken in der Geschichte” [vi] (“Blind Spots in History”) directed against the attempts by the SED and its West German subsidiary DKP to deny or cover up the persecution and murder of thousands of German communists in the 1930s by Stalin’s secret police.*

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

Hermann Weber: Yes, those were genuine scientific polemics. If polemics are to be of any value, i.e. if they are meant to convince people, it’s especially important to be very precise, to accurately prove all claims one makes, to meticulously check all sources used. Such a polemic can be very sharp, but everything must be true and genuine. With Service’s book the exact opposite is the case: Trotsky is being cut down in every respect, other historians are being smeared—and nothing is true or genuine.

David North’s book, however, is a brilliant polemic—sometimes very sharp in its tone, but factually very striking and well-done. The great achievement is that David North, for all his commitment, argues in a factual and objective manner. I was amazed at the accuracy and wealth of factual details, with which he pinpoints Service’s distortions, slanders and falsifications and at the same time creates a portrait of the life and work of Leon Trotsky before his readers’ eyes which corresponds more to the historical truth.

WSWS: *And the second reason...*

Hermann Weber: ... are the many passages in which Service juggles with anti-Semitic prejudices. That’s simply shameful! And it would be even more shameful if Suhrkamp allowed such prejudices to find their specific audiences in Germany of all places. Probably they are also aimed at relevant circles in Russia. Here too, Service proceeds with the method of a defamatory diatribe. When he writes, “*The leadership of the Bolshevik Party was widely alleged to be a Jewish gang*”—what does he mean by “widely”? Service cannot provide a single shred of evidence to prove his assertion. Such terms were nowhere common at that time, except among fascist tendencies and among the Nazis in Germany.

Service has obviously taken pains not to leave out any negative portrayal and distortion ever spread about Trotsky at some point in history, be it by Stalin or his successors or by the Nazis. This also includes anti-Semitic travesties and prejudices. The anti-Semitic caricature which Service includes in his book without stating the source stems from a fascist smear sheet of 1921. Maybe Service himself is not an anti-Semite, but he has formulated many passages in his book which will warm the hearts of anti-Semitic readers. David North has shown that in detail.

The view of Trotsky which Service presents to the reader can be summarized as follows: the Stalinists branded Trotsky as a criminal, the Nazis denounced him as a Bolshevik Jew—Service combines both.

WSWS: *How do you account for the fact that such a diatribe is being put on the market, and by Harvard University Press into the bargain? [vii]*

Hermann Weber: I am not aware, of course, of Service’s personal motives, one cannot see inside his head. I can only rely on what he himself said about the objective of his book at a book launch in London. He said something like: “*There’s life in the old boy Trotsky yet—but if the ice pick of Stalin’s agent, who murdered Trotsky 40 years ago, didn’t quite do its job killing him off, I hope I’ve managed it with my book.*” [viii] An outrageous statement beyond human understanding! It is outrageous and beyond human understanding that an author can proclaim anything like this and still be supported by an academic publisher.

Ramon Mercader was an agent working as a cog in a killing machine, firmly integrated into the Stalinist apparatus, which pursued definite

interests and political objectives. To this apparatus, Trotsky and his ideas always represented a threat. One is therefore quite able to explain Ramon Mercader’s crime in a historical context. But when someone announces today, seventy years after Trotsky’s assassination, that he had to and wanted to complete with a book what Mercader failed to do with his political murder, i.e. to destroy Trotsky’s reputation and honour, then that is outrageous and beyond human understanding.

However, it also explains the style of the book. When one pursues such a goal, there is no need to research and examine much of anything, one does not take care to conscientiously check references and prove factual allegations. All you have to do is simply cobble together something quickly. It is not just that Service does not know history or has not thoroughly examined it. For him history is simply irrelevant. He is only interested in one goal: finishing off Trotsky!

In his eagerness to succeed in that he goes so far as to denigrate all those historians who in the course of their research on the life and works of Trotsky have conducted genuine scientific work and produced groundbreaking standard works which are still authoritative today. He refers to the French historian Pierre Broué [ix] as an “idolater” and maintains that Isaac Deutscher in his wonderful three-volume biography [x] sought to make a cult out of Trotsky.

These two writers—unlike Service—genuinely brought new sources, new historical facts to light. It is not at all necessary to agree with all of their assessments. I myself, for example, have never found Isaac Deutscher’s analysis and attitude to the Stalinist bureaucracy to be clear and sharp enough. I identified a certain degree of playing down Stalinism in his writings which, as you might know, had great influence on many trade unionists in Germany. I also have my differences with Broué. But in view of the huge amount of material displayed and their brilliant presentation, both biographies are extremely praiseworthy works, rewarding and full of insight for all those interested in history.

In contrast, the incredibly large number of references listed by Service is merely aimed at feigning a scientific approach. Contrary to all of the statements made by publishing houses and his own assertions, he has not revealed and developed any new material, as far as I can see. Instead he cites sources that do not exist or testify something completely different to what he alleges. The many snide and denunciatory assertions about Trotsky, which are not scientifically substantiated or documented, are mostly familiar from Stalin’s propaganda.

In his book David North correctly shows that in this respect Service is merely following the footsteps of two other British historians, Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher. But one gets the impression that Service felt prompted always to go one better.

WSWS: *Service’s book has in the meantime been published in Spanish and French, Suhrkamp plans a German language edition. How do you explain, as a historian, that a rather insignificant Oxford professor devotes so much energy to completely kill off a figure of world historical significance and in so doing is supported by major publishers, institutions and media? After all Trotsky was assassinated in 1940 and hence has been dead for more than 70 years!*

Hermann Weber: This must surely be seen in a wider context. As I have already pointed out, the number of publications by and about Trotsky in recent time indicates a growing interest in him. On the one hand, the collapse of Stalinism twenty years ago, on the other hand the end of the alleged triumph of capitalism with the current financial crisis—I can well imagine that there are forces which will go to any length “to finish off” Trotsky and his ideas in order to prevent them from finding greater dissemination and following.

Note of the Editorial Board:

The conversation was conducted in July and October of this year at the university in Mannheim. Unfortunately, shortly after having finished it,

Prof. Hermann Weber was hospitalized. It was through the help of his wife Gerda Weber and his scientific assistant Mr. Basim Aawais that he was able to check and authorize the text presented above in the hospital. The editorial board extends its thanks to both.

[i] Hermann Weber, *Die DDR 1945-1990* (München 2011, fifth edition)

[ii] Georg Jungclas (1902-1975), leader of the Pabloite organization in Germany until the late 1960s. The Pabloite tendency under the leadership of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel broke with the perspectives of Trotskyism in the early 1950s and adapted opportunistically to the Stalinist bureaucracies.

[iii] UAP = Independent Workers Party, a party which the Pabloites helped to launch in support of Tito in Yugoslavia, who criticized the Moscow bureaucracy under Stalin from a nationalist, not an internationalist point of view.

[iv] David North, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* (Detroit: 2009, Mehring Books).

[v] Hermann Weber, *Ulbricht fälscht Geschichte, Kommentar und Dokumente zu dem Buch „Grundriss der Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung“ – Ulbricht falsifies History – Commentary and documents to the Book “A basic outline of the German workers’ movement”* (Cologne 1964).

[vi] Hermann Weber, *Weißer Flecken in der Geschichte. Die KPD-Opfer der Stalinistischen Säuberungen und ihre Rehabilitierung -- Blind Spots in history. The KPD victims of Stalinist purges and their rehabilitation* (Frankfurt am Main 1989)

[vii] Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass., USA) and Macmillan (London) have published the original edition under the title *Trotsky – A Biography*.

[viii] see article in *London Evening Standard* on 22 October, 2009

[ix] Pierre Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris 1988)

[x] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921* (1954); *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929* (1959); *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940* (1963)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact