

David North speaks in Berlin: “In Defence of Leon Trotsky and Historical Truth”

Our reporter
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On Monday, January 30, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the youth organization of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in cooperation with the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) and Mehring Publishers, held a well-attended meeting at the Technical University of Berlin. The title of the meeting was “In Defence of Leon Trotsky and Historical Truth.”

The main report was given by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States. He is the author of *In Defence of Leon Trotsky*, a book which subjects the biographies of Trotsky written by the British professors Geoffrey Swain, Ian Thatcher and Robert Service to a detailed, carefully researched and devastating critique.

Wolfgang Weber, an editor at Mehring Publishers, which has published the German edition of North's book, chaired the meeting together with an ISSE representative. Weber said North had demonstrated that the Trotsky biographies in question did not meet basic academic standards. “They fail to deal seriously with the life and work of one of the greatest political figures of the 20th century,” Weber said. “They are tendentious works based on lies and historical falsifications, utilising bogus references and, in the case of Service's book, anti-Semitic clichés.”

Weber stressed the significance of the open letter to the Suhrkamp publishing house in Germany signed by 14 prominent German and Austrian historians protesting the planned publication of the Service biography. Though the authors and signatories of the letter represent diverse political traditions and historical fields of research, Weber noted, “They feel they have a responsibility to historical truth and the defence of academic standards when dealing with history.”

In opening his report, North called the audience's attention to the fact that the meeting was being held exactly on the 75th anniversary of the conclusion of the second of the three Moscow Trials. That trial ended with the pronouncement of death sentences against major Bolshevik leaders of the Russian Revolution, including Georgi Pyatakov, Grigori Sokolnikov, Nikolai Muralov, Leonid Serebryakov and Mikhail Boguslavsky. Another defendant, Karl Radek, was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment but was

murdered only two years after the trial.

The three Moscow Trials?held in August 1936, January 1937, and March 1938?were the culmination of a campaign of political terror, North explained, “organized by Stalin and directed not only against the Bolshevik leaders of the 1917 October Revolution, but against all representatives of Marxist politics and socialist culture in the Soviet working class and intelligentsia.” The trials were based entirely on historical falsifications and lies.

Leon Trotsky was the main target of the Stalinist slanders and accusations. From his exile in Mexico, he denounced the allegations of the Stalin regime and called for an “international counter-trial” that would uncover that the “real criminals hide under the cloak of the accusers.” Trotsky's campaign to refute Stalin's trials led to the formation of the Dewey Commission, which after a nine-month investigation acquitted Trotsky of all charges and denounced the Moscow trials as a “frame-up.”

North explained that historical lies always serve a social and political function. He said: “To the extent that the ruling elite regards genuine historical events to be a threat to its political interests and social position, it resorts to distortions and falsifications. The Stalinist bureaucracy sought refuge in the most outrageous lies to cover up its betrayal of the principles of the October Revolution and mask the growing contradiction between the real aims of socialism and those of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a privileged caste.”

Arguments over history, North continued, are not only over the past, but also over the present and future. In this context, he pointed out that Germany had undergone its own painful experiences with distortions of historical truth. He referred to the right-wing “stab in the back” legend promoted after World War I, according to which Germany lost the war because of treasonous opposition to the war effort by Jews and revolutionaries. He also dealt with the “historians' dispute” that followed the publication of Fritz Fischer's monumental study, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*.

At the time of the publication of the book in 1961, historical research in Germany was dominated by arch-conservative historians who argued that the First World War was largely the

result of a series of errors committed by all the belligerent powers. The German government, they maintained, had no specific responsibility for the 1914 catastrophe.

Based on a careful study of new archival material, however, Fischer refuted the conservative consensus. He showed that the German government's aggressive policies and willingness to risk war in 1914 flowed from the geopolitical, economic and social interests of the ruling elite.

North explained that Fischer's findings angered the German academic establishment as well as the government because they demonstrated continuity between World War I and World War II. Hitler's policies were not some sort of "unanticipated historical accident." Rather, his decisions stemmed from long-standing and deep-rooted interests of the German ruling class. Those who attacked Fischer, North pointed out, did so because his research cut across the efforts of the German bourgeoisie to absolve itself of responsibility for the crimes committed by the Third Reich.

North then posed the question: "What are the political necessities and social interests that underlie the current attempts to falsify Trotsky's life, his actions, ideas and personality?"

The answer could be found in the reaction of the ruling class to the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the USSR: "The end of history was announced. The collapse of the Soviet Union was declared to have been inevitable, socialism had failed, and capitalism was the only, and the best, of all possible worlds. In other words, there was, and is, no alternative to capitalism."

To maintain such a distortion of history amid a profound crisis of capitalism, North explained, it was necessary for the ruling elite to discredit Leon Trotsky: "The political program for which Trotsky fought is ignored and the attempt is made to personally vilify him." Trotsky is accordingly slandered as a bad man, a faithless husband, a negligent father, and an arrogant and cruel politician.

The aim of right-wing historians such as Thatcher, Swain and Service is to demonstrate that Trotsky was "as bad, or possibly even worse" than Stalin.

Such personal attacks on Trotsky are employed to divert attention from essential issues that should be of central interest to historians—the questions of program and policy that underlay Trotsky's struggle against the Soviet bureaucracy.

"What about Trotsky's critique of Stalinism, Stalin's theory of socialism in one country, forced collectivisation, and the policy of the Communist International and the German Communist Party, which led to Hitler's victory," North asked. He contrasted the policies of Stalin and Trotsky on Germany in 1933.

North explained that based on his theory of "social fascism," Stalin downplayed the danger of fascism, declaring the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to be the Communist Party's main enemy. Trotsky, on the other hand, argued in countless articles and statements for a united front of the two mass parties of the working class to prevent the taking of power by the Nazis.

Had the German Communist Party (KPD) taken up Trotsky's policies, the course of the 20th century would have been very different, North declared. Even if there had been no other differences between Trotsky and Stalin, the conflict over the policies of the Communist International and the KPD in the fight against Hitler were so fundamental that it is ludicrous to maintain that Trotsky did not represent a political alternative.

At the end of his lecture, North then drew out the connection between the struggle for historical truth and current political developments. He stressed that the social struggles developing across the globe could be successfully led only on the basis of a socialist program that drew upon the lessons of the 20th century. "A scientific understanding of the past is crucial in order to prepare for the future, and the writings of Trotsky are vital in this respect," he said.

The lecture was greeted with considerable approval and applause. When asked who in the audience supported the proposal that Suhrkamp withdraw its plans to publish the Service biography of Trotsky, around 80 percent of those in attendance responded in favour. The discussion during and after the event indicated that increasing numbers of students, academics and workers are seeking an alternative to capitalism and turning to the socialist perspective represented by Leon Trotsky and the ICFI.

The meeting also caught the attention of the German media. The German daily *Berliner Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Rundschau* published a report by Christian Schlüter, who cynically sought to ridicule the historical questions and the principled struggle taken up by Trotsky. Expressing annoyance at the fact that North's critique had caused problems for Suhrkamp, Schlüter concluded his report with the complaint that "One cannot get rid of a David North so easily."



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