

Robert Service wins support from the extreme right in Germany

Wolfgang Weber
7 February 2012

The weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* has weighed in on the debate over a German edition of Robert Service's biography of Leon Trotsky. It wholeheartedly defends the position of Service against fourteen historians and political scientists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland who opposed the planned publication of the book by Suhrkamp Verlag in a letter to the publishing house last summer.

Junge Freiheit is the "intellectual" mouthpiece of tendencies in Germany in the orbit of the far-right German National Party (NPD) and German People's Union (DVU). In contrast to the ranting and vulgar demeanor of these parties, the newspaper strives to appear serious and to assume an academic tone in the dissemination of racist and nationalist propaganda.

Under the headline "Trotsky and the German Consensus," the article begins by praising the goal that Service set for himself in writing the biography—namely, to destroy the reputation of Leon Trotsky as a revolutionary politician and as a person. The article notes that there are still people and tendencies that hold Trotsky in high regard, and states approvingly that Robert Service knows "about these tendencies and wants to consciously confront them." It continues: "There is still life in the figure of Trotsky, he [Service] said in 2009 on the publication of the original English edition. He explicitly explained the aim of the book: 'Since the ice pick—used to murder him in 1940 by Stalin's agent Ramon Mercader has not completely finished him off, my book will hopefully do it now.'"

Stefan Scheil, the article's author, welcomes the book by Service because it fits in with his political programme of rewriting the entire history of the 20th century so as to rehabilitate Nazism. He hopes that Service and a German edition of his biography of

Trotsky will help finally to end a "post-war taboo" and shatter the "German consensus." By this consensus, which he insists must be overcome, Scheil understands the condemnation of Nazism and the Nazi military's assault on the Soviet Union.

Scheil takes aim at the authors and signatories of the letter to Suhrkamp by name: "Among them are Peter Steinbach and Hermann Weber, two professors at the University of Mannheim, who have shaped the current consensus as researchers into the resistance and communism. But Heiko Haumann, a professor from Basel, and Mario Kessler, a professor from Potsdam, have also joined in."

Scheil has been a frequent writer for *Junge Freiheit* for ten years and a regular columnist since 2009, and has published numerous books putting forward the position of "historical revisionism." This tendency eschews a scientific approach to history and stands in the right-wing camp. It argues that the scientifically accepted account of the history of the 20th century should be revised. Hitler's Germany did not launch an unprovoked attack on the Soviet Union in order to create "Lebensraum in the East" for German capitalism. Rather, it was forced to launch a preemptive war in order to protect itself against a Soviet attack. The "Judgment at Nuremberg regarding German war guilt" was "manipulated."

Scheil came forward publicly some ten years ago with his attacks on the Wehrmacht (Nazi-era army) exhibition that documented the crimes of the Wehrmacht in World War II. He supports the thesis of a "clean Wehrmacht" that had had nothing to do with Nazi ideology or the war of extermination against the Soviet Union, and committed no crimes.

Junge Freiheit is well known for providing a platform for representatives of such revisionist historical theses.

At the same time, it takes care to maintain a semblance of respectability, and therefore prefers people with an academic background like Stefan Scheil as writers. The semblance of academic gravity and political seriousness serves to hide the cornerstone of its interpretation of history and politics: the lie. The method underlying the revisionist historical theories is the falsification of history, the bending of historical facts and documents to serve political aims. Documents are misquoted, twisted, or deliberately ignored. These are, in a word, the same methods upon which the work of Robert Service is based.

The truth falls by the wayside in the article in *Junge Freiheit* about the historians' letter to Suhrkamp Verlag. Scheil writes that the objections to the book of the authors and signatories of the letter are "... not to some objectionable passages, but the overall trend. They therefore do not provide any specific grounds" for their objections. In fact, the historians have provided several important grounds for their view that Suhrkamp should not publish the book.

First, they have explicitly supported the very comprehensive criticism by David North contained in the book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, which has been given an unqualified endorsement by the American historian Bertrand Patenaude in the prestigious journal *The American Historical Review*. North has pointed out in detail not only the numerous factual errors—such as wrong names, false personal data of key persons, etc.—but also misleading references and even the falsification of sources. Like North and Patenaude, the historians who signed the letter to Suhrkamp argue that Service has not met even the most basic standards and norms of historical science.

That the historians oppose the “overall trend” of the book, as Scheil writes, is, however, true. They object to the tendentiousness to which Service himself testifies of wanting to “completely destroy” Trotsky. The historians write that towards that end, Service “often resorts to the formulas associated with Stalinist propaganda.” Scheil omits all these arguments—briefly and factually formulated in the letter—in order to plant the lie that the historians do not provide any “specific grounds” for opposing publication of the book.

The fact that Robert Service finds intellectual co-thinkers in Germany at *Junge Freiheit* says a great deal about the character of his book. It strongly confirms the

position of the fourteen scientists who concluded their letter to Suhrkamp Verlag with the words: “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.”

It also confirms what the author of these lines wrote in a letter dated October 28, 2011 to the management of Suhrkamp Verlag: “It is not about whether or not Service is an anti-Semite. Even if he is not, he has written many passages in a way that can only unleash enthusiasm in extreme right-wing, anti-Semitic circles in Germany or in Russia. It would be very unfortunate and indeed fatal if a renowned scientific publisher with a history and authority like that of Suhrkamp were to endorse such a cynical and thinly veiled maneuver. Regard for the traditions of your own firm, and regard for the problems such a publication would create in Germany, of all places, suggest that the well-founded objections of 14 renowned historians to the publication of the book by Robert Service should be given careful consideration by your publishing house.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact