

Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag publishes Robert Service's diatribe against Leon Trotsky

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In early July, Suhrkamp Publishers (Suhrkamp Verlag) released the German edition of Robert Service's denunciatory biography of Leon Trotsky. The circumstances surrounding its publication can only be assessed as a scandal that has tarnished the reputation of the publishing house. Fourteen highly respected German, Austrian and Swiss historians and political scientists, including Hermann Weber, doyen in the field of research into Communism and Stalinism, wrote a letter last summer urging Suhrkamp to refrain from its planned publication [footnote 1]. Service's book, the scholars wrote, violated the basic tenets of scholarly work. The scholars initially sent their letter as a private communication to Suhrkamp in order to allow the publisher time to consider their objections objectively, without any sort of public pressure. The scholars drew attention to *In Defence of Leon Trotsky* by David North (published by Mehring books in 2010), which had subjected Service's book to a detailed critique. North's analysis not only exposed that Service's book was loaded with crude factual errors, he also proved that Service had misrepresented the content of historical documents, repeated long-discredited anti-Trotsky lies that had been invented by the Stalinist regime, and falsified key elements of Trotsky's personal and political life.

Upon receipt of the historians' letter in late July of 2011, Suhrkamp postponed the release of the book, which was ready to print. This extraordinary decision clearly signified that Suhrkamp was deeply troubled by the criticisms. It let it be known that a careful review of the work was underway. But after several months—without having any communication with the historians who had written the letter—Suhrkamp announced its intention to go ahead with the release of a corrected version of Service's biography. Finally, after a delay of one year, the book has been published. Except for a few minor cosmetic changes, the German edition is essentially the same as the English-language original.

In fact, only 15 corrections or attempts at correction can be detected. These have been carried out with such sloppiness that in many cases they actually make the original error even worse.

Among the many false claims made by Service was the

assertion that Trotsky was known as *Leiba* Davidovich Bronstein during his childhood and youth. Trotsky, according to Service, changed his markedly Yiddish first name to the Russian equivalent, *Lev*, at the age of 18 in order to escape from and conceal a Jewish identity of which he was ashamed. This "revelation" formed the foundation of Service's central thesis: That Trotsky's much-acclaimed autobiography, *My Life*, was an elaborate exercise in autobiographical deception, aimed at concealing crucial elements of his life. Service's "exposure" of Trotsky's embarrassment over his religious background served as a pretext for the biography's obsessive and crude fixation with Trotsky's Jewish identity. The problem for Service was that the story of the name change from *Leiba* to *Lev* was exposed by North to be an invention. Young Bronstein had been known all his life as *Lev* (which was also the name of his grandfather), or the Russian diminutive, *Lyova*.

However, Service's falsification is maintained in the German edition. The brazenness of this fraud is made all the more glaring by the fact that Suhrkamp, in its promotional material posted on the publisher's Internet site, states explicitly that Trotsky was born *Lev* Davidovich Bronstein.

The German edition preserves the tendentious judgments, unsubstantiated allegations and slanders regarding the positions of Trotsky. One counts no less than 22 cases of falsely recorded and uncorrected dates, confusion of names, and distortions of historical events. Suhrkamp was not troubled by the fact that in dealing with the revolution in China in 1927, Service confuses the events in Shanghai with the uprising in Canton six months later. Suhrkamp has failed to correct obvious errors relating to events in Germany, such as Service's factually inaccurate portrayal of the failed revolution in 1923 and the role the Communist Party played in them.

In some cases, the Suhrkamp editors made a half-hearted effort to correct Service's mistakes, but only made matters worse. For example, the English edition of Service's biography refers to the activities of the police provocateur Yevno Azev in the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Service botches up the reference by claiming that Azev was murdered by the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1909. In fact, Azev was not murdered at all

and lived until 1918. In the German edition, Suhrkamp rescues Azev from his 1909 death. But it makes him, incorrectly, a member of another party, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

An especially pernicious aspect of the edition are the many completely unchanged passages in which Robert Service coquettes with anti-Semitic prejudices—passages which have, as the letter of the 14 historians puts it, “a disconcerting overtone”. Not even the anti-Semitic caricature of Trotsky has been dispensed with—as has been done in the second English (paperback) edition and the French edition. It has been reprinted in the German edition without any historical explanation in the Appendix and without giving the source—a Nazi pamphlet titled *The Grave-Diggers of Russia*.

The issue here is not whether Service is an anti-Semite. No one has made this charge. However, it is a well-known historical fact that Trotsky’s Jewish ancestry was exploited to the hilt by his Stalinist and fascist enemies. This often assumed the form of referring to him by his surname (Bronstein) and, as noted above, changing his first name from Lev to Leiba. The aim was always to appeal to anti-Semitic prejudices. Service was certainly aware of this fact as he wrote his biography. There is, of course, nothing illegitimate about a biographer discussing Trotsky’s religious background. But how this is done is an important matter. Service’s repeated references to the young Trotsky as *Leiba* give his game away.

In a letter of October 28, 2011 to Suhrkamp, this reviewer noted that Service “has written many passages in such a way that they could be received with enthusiasm only by extreme right-wing, anti-Semitic circles in Germany or also in Russia. It would be very unfortunate, not to say disastrous, if a respected academic publisher with such an authority and history like Suhrkamp backed such a cynical and obvious maneuver.” Suhrkamp *has* decided to back it—despite its own history and despite the large number of German-Jewish writers who, having been forced to exile during the Third Reich, after the war for good reasons regarded Suhrkamp as a principled and politically progressive publisher.

Suhrkamp has established over many decades a prized reputation as the publisher of high-quality scholarly works. Its editing process has been admired for its thoroughness. Thus, the question that inevitably arises is why Suhrkamp accepted Service’s miserable work in the first place, and then went ahead with its publication despite the objections of many outstanding scholars?

Suhrkamp was originally taken aback by the exposure of the innumerable mistakes in Service’s book. It was, without question, troubled by Service’s grotesque treatment of Trotsky’s religious background. At least initially, it appears, Suhrkamp was inclined to proceed in a principled manner. It delayed publication and consulted with experts. But in the end, professional scruples were overwhelmed by a combination of financial and political pressures. Service was not inclined to

collaborate with Suhrkamp in a substantial editing or rewriting of the book. He offered his book to Suhrkamp on a “take it or leave it basis.”

Service is not a man devoted to the historian’s craft. A genuine scholar, confronted with such devastating evaluations of his work, would feel obligated to prepare a detailed reply to his critics. Service has done nothing of the sort. He has, even in his own mind, no intellectual reputation to defend. He is nothing more than an anti-communist propagandist, and his work was never intended to be anything other than an exercise in character assassination.

Suhrkamp must have come under huge political pressure to go ahead with the publication of the book. This is, however, no excuse for its actions. By succumbing to this pressure, whatever its nature and source, Suhrkamp has done untold damage to its reputation.

Footnote 1:

The 14 signatories are:

Dr. Bernhard Bayerlein (Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam),

Prof. em. Dr. Helmut Dahmer (Technical University of Darmstadt),

Prof. Dr. Heiko Haumann (University of Basel),

Dr. Wladislaw Hedeler (Historian and author, Berlin),

Andrea Hurton (Historian and author, Vienna),

Prof. Dr. Mario Kessler (Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam),

Dr. Hartmut Mehringer † (Institute for Contemporary History, Berlin and Munich),

Prof. em. Dr. Oskar Negt (University of Hanover),

Dr. Hans Schafranek (Historian and author, Vienna),

Prof. Dr. Oliver Rathkolb (Director of the Institute for Contemporary History, University of Vienna),

Prof. Dr. Peter Steinbach (University of Mannheim, Director of The German Resistance Memorial Center in Berlin),

Dr. Reiner Tosstorff (Lecturer at the University of Mainz),

Prof. em. Dr. Dr. hc. Hermann Weber (University of Mannheim),

Dr. Rolf Wörsdörfer (Lecturer at the Technical University of Darmstadt).



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