

Nine questions for Robert Service

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany)
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On February 12, British author Robert Service will speak at Berlin's Humboldt University about his internationally discredited biography of Leon Trotsky. Service will be speaking at the invitation of Professor Jörg Baberowski.

Service's book is a diatribe. It violates the basic standards and rules of scientific scholarship and contains historical falsifications and even anti-Semitic allusions. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG — Socialist Equality Party) has addressed a letter to Professor Baberowski and formulated the following nine questions for Robert Service. More information can be found on trotzki.de.

1. In June 2011, the *American Historical Review*, the most authoritative historical journal in the United States, published a devastating critique of your biography of Trotsky. In his review, Professor Bertrand M. Patenaude of Stanford University attests to the “numerous distortions of the historical record and outright errors of fact to the point that the intellectual integrity of the whole enterprise is open to question.” (*The American Historical Review*, vol. 116, no. 3, Oxford University Press, June 2011, pp. 900-902).

Patenaude describes “the number of factual mistakes” in your book as “astonishing,” noting that he himself had counted over four dozen. “Service's book is completely unreliable as a reference. At times the errors are jaw-dropping,” he concludes.

This prestigious American journal aligns itself unconditionally with the wide-ranging criticisms David North levels against your Trotsky biography in his book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, which is available in German. Patenaude writes that they are not hyperbole, as North's Trotskyist convictions might lead one to believe, but “detailed, meticulous, well-argued and devastating.”

The *American Historical Review* concludes: “North calls Service's biography a ‘piece of hack-work’. Strong words, but entirely justified. Harvard University Press has placed its imprimatur upon a book that fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship.”

A more devastating critique by one of the leading historical journals in the world can hardly be imagined. Moreover, fourteen renowned European historians and social scientists have supported the criticism and, in a letter, discouraged Suhrkamp Verlag from publishing the German edition of your book. Despite all this, you have never responded to the criticism and tried to defend your reputation.

Why? What explanation do you have for this? One can only conclude from your reaction that you cannot provide an answer, and that the charges against your book are correct and irrefutable.

2. The London *Evening Standard* of October 23, 2009 quotes you with the words: “There's life in the old guy Trotsky. If the ice

pick didn't finish him off, I hope my book does.”

How do you explain this statement? It appears that with your book you have posed to yourself the task of character assassination, not serious political biography.

3. Your book contains a series of outrageous and historically false statements aimed at attacking Trotsky's personal integrity.

For example, you claim Trotsky treated his first wife, Aleksandra Sokolovskaya, “shabbily”, (p. 4), and state that after having produced two children with her, “he decided to run off” (p. 67).

[All quotations are taken from: Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography*, Cambridge and London, 2009].

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.

In fact, all available sources show that Trotsky fled from his banishment in Siberia with the complete agreement of his then-wife in order to continue his political work in exile. The two maintained their intellectual connection and friendship to the end of their lives. Aleksandra Sokolovskaya and the children were supported financially by Trotsky's parents. Only Stalin's terror apparatus broke the contact between the two. Aleksandra Sokolovskaya was murdered in 1938 on account of her friendship with Trotsky.

Why are you seeking to make Trotsky responsible for the murder of his family members by the Stalinist regime, his worst enemy?

4. Although Trotsky's political influence rested above all on his writings, and he bequeathed an extensive body of work, you have written a biography that does not seriously deal with a single one of his countless articles, essays or books on political, social and cultural issues. You have written a biography about a man who worked primarily through his ideas without explaining a single one of these ideas.

In the introduction, you claim: “His written legacy should not be allowed to become the entire story ... it is as important to pinpoint what Trotsky was silent about as what he chose to speak or write about. His unuttered basic assumptions were integral to the amalgam of his life” (p. 5).

This is, frankly, absurd. How could you find out what Trotsky's “unuttered basic assumptions” were without having studied what he actually wrote? And what are these “unuttered basic assumptions”?

5. While you ignore the content of his writings, your book teems with disparaging remarks about Trotsky as a writer. Among other things, you maintain, “Always he wrote whatever was in his head”

(p. 79). You write: “He refused to bother himself with research on most questions currently bothering the party’s intellectual elite” (p. 109), and, “His thought was a confused and confusing ragbag” (p. 353). The list is endless.

This view stands in marked contrast to the judgment of numerous experts and contemporaries. For example, in his journal, Walter Benjamin cites the assessment of Bertolt Brecht from 1931 that “There are good reasons for thinking Trotsky is the greatest living European writer.”

Today, even many of his political opponents are obliged to acknowledge that Trotsky foresaw the dangers of National Socialism more clearly than anyone else and was correct to call for a united front of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Communist Party (KPD) against the Nazis, a policy that was vehemently rejected by Stalin and the SPD leadership. His writings on National Socialism, which comprise 800 pages in the (far from complete) German edition of 1971, to this day rank among the best that has been written on this topic.

You devote only a few lines to the events in Germany, however, and do not refer to Trotsky’s writings at all. Instead, you falsely assert that Trotsky “felt no urge to study Hitler, Mussolini or Franco” (p. 474). In the introduction, you declare: “And if ever Trotsky had been the paramount leader instead of Stalin, the risks of a bloodbath in Europe would have been drastically increased” (p. 3).

What are you trying to say? Were the 80 million dead of World War II and the Holocaust not a bloodbath? How could Trotsky, who fought against the paralysis and disorientation of the workers’ movement by the Stalinist bureaucracy and for its mobilisation against the Nazis, have caused a bigger bloodbath?

6. Your book concerns itself quite obsessively with Trotsky’s Jewish heritage and courts anti-Semitic stereotypes. Among other things, you write: “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 of the ‘Jewish problem’” (p. 192).

You further state: “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... But he was far from being the only Jew who visibly enjoyed the opportunities for public self-advancement” (p. 202).

And: “Hair-splitting disputes were common to Marxism and Judaism” (p. 202). “The party’s leadership was widely identified as a Jewish gang” (p. 205).

In the English edition, a Nazi cartoon of Trotsky can be found (without a source being given). It has the caption, “In reality, his real nose was neither long nor bent and he never allowed his goatee to become straggly or his hair ill-kempt.”

Why have you employed such caricatures of Jews? Why do you impute allegedly Jewish traits to Trotsky? And why do you do this, even though you know only too well that Trotsky’s opponents mobilised anti-Semitic prejudices against him?

You have even invented your own story to underline Trotsky’s Jewishness. Over the first forty pages of your book, you constantly call him Leiba, even though he neither bore nor used this Yiddish first name. Why do you here again base yourself again on the anti-

Semitic caricatures his Stalinist and fascist enemies drew of him?

7. Your book expresses barely disguised admiration for Stalin. You write, “Stalin was no mediocrity but rather had an impressive range of skills as well as a talent for decisive leadership” (p. 3). And, “Trotsky did not go down to defeat at the hands of ‘the bureaucracy’: he lost to a man and a clique with a superior understanding of Soviet public life” (p. 4).

In reality, Stalin’s policies in the 1920s and 1930s comprised an endless series of catastrophically wrong decisions—concerning the internal dynamic of economic life, the fascist danger in Germany, the risk of a German invasion.

You make these assertions without going into the criticism of Stalinism that Trotsky developed consistently over 17 years, from 1923 to 1940. Why do you ignore Trotsky’s *Revolution Betrayed*, his critique of Stalin’s economic policy in the 1920s, his criticism of “socialism in a single country,” his criticism of forced collectivisation, and everything else? There is nothing about this in your book.

8. Why are there such obvious and outrageous mistakes in your book?

Just to quote the *American Historical Review* again, you “mix up the names of Trotsky’s sons, misidentify the largest political group in the first Duma in 1906, botch the name of the Austrian archduke assassinated at Sarajevo, misrepresent the circumstances of Nicholas II’s abdication, get backward Trotsky’s position in 1940 on the United States’ entry into World War II, and give the wrong year of death of Trotsky’s widow.”

How much time and effort have you put into a book in which the most basic historical facts are so obviously wrong?

9. And a last question. The title of your contribution to the colloquium reads: “Trotsky—Problems of a Biography.”

As you must know, this spelling of Trotsky’s name is incorrect. In English, Trotsky is usually written with an “s”. The only ones who after the October Revolution used the spelling “Trotsky” were—as you must know as Trotsky’s biographer—the fascists in the 1930s and the British and American Stalinists. They wrote Trotsky with “tzky” in order to make his name seem more threatening.

Why do you make such a fundamental mistake?



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