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The life and death of Trotsky

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Tariq Ali on *Trotsky* by Robert Service and *Stalin's Nemesis* by Bertrand M Patenaude.

Trotsky: A Biography, by Robert Service 600pp, Macmillan, £25

Stalin's Nemesis: The Exile and Murder of Leon Trotsky, by Bertrand M Patenaude 352pp, Faber, £20

For over half a century, Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography of Trotsky, a literary-historical masterpiece in its own right, was regarded as the last word on the subject. Many who were deeply hostile to the Russian revolution and all its leading actors nonetheless acclaimed these books: in 1997, asked to nominate his favourite book for National Book Day, the newly elected prime minister, Tony Blair, nominated the trilogy. Twelve years later the culture in this country has become so overwhelmingly conformist that any alternative to capitalism is considered outlandish.

The Service industry has now produced a stodgy volume on Trotsky to add to a collection that includes Lenin and Stalin. Unlike Deutscher, as he tells us, Service is hostile to the revolution and its leaders, but he is irritated by the fact that Trotsky has had such a good press in the west (news to me). He was just the same as the others except that he wrote very well and this appealed to New York intellectuals. The Service view can be summarised in a sentence: Trotsky was a ruthless and cold-blooded murderer and deserves to be exposed as such.

This counter-factual approach is nothing new and was the stock-in-trade of most anti-communist and pro-Stalin ideologues for much of the last century. Service informs us that Winston Churchill backed Stalin against Trotsky during the show trials. The old warhorse certainly knew how to distinguish between conservatives and radicals. He had little time for Gramsci either, and almost drowned Mussolini in praise as a bulwark against the evil tide of Bolshevism.

Churchill's essay denouncing Trotsky as the "ogre of Europe" is written with a brio and passion that almost matches that of his target. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of Service's plodding account in which some of the allegations are so trivial that they are best ignored. On most of the important issues – the danger of substituting the party for the state in Russia, the necessity of uniting with social-democrats and liberals to defeat Hitler, the futility of forcing the communists into an alliance with Chiang Kai-shek in China, the fate that awaited the Jews if Hitler came to power and constant warnings that the Nazis were preparing to invade the Soviet Union – he was proved right time and time again.

Unsurprisingly, the counter-factual school of historians rarely discusses what might have happened had Generals Kornilov, Denikin and Yudenich triumphed instead of Lenin and Trotsky. One thing is virtually certain: since the revolution was portrayed as the work of Jewish-Bolsheviks, a wave of pogroms would have decimated the Jews.

Patenaude's shorter and much better written book is far more objective and, in fact, more scholarly.

Though it concentrates on the period of Trotsky's Mexican exile and provides fascinating pen-portraits of lovers, acolytes and killers alike (including details of Trotsky's affair with Frida Kahlo that Isaac Deutscher so sweetly veiled), it also encapsulates his earlier life.

The socialist revolution, unlike the bourgeois revolutions that transformed Europe in the 16-18th centuries, was a premeditated project intended for a more advanced country than Russia. Even for its leaders, the Bolshevik triumph of 1917 was a leap in the dark. Bolshevik orthodoxy did not believe that the infant republic could last on its own. The party leadership was waiting for the German revolution to break its isolation and transform Europe. Instead the main imperialist states decided to back the White counter-revolution, leading to a civil war that was won by the newly created Red Army, but at a terrible cost: the peasants had been alienated by forced requisitions and conscription. The civil war of 1918-21 exhausted the tiny working class. Many died and a layer that survived was rapidly absorbed into the machinery of the new state.

Trotsky, as the founder and organiser of the Red Army, was undoubtedly ruthless in ensuring the victory of his side - as was Lincoln during the American civil war. Exhausted at home and isolated abroad, the Bolshevik leaders, obsessed by the fate of Robespierre and Saint-Just, decided that they must hold on to power whatever the cost. An early outcome was the brutal repression of the Kronstadt sailors' mutiny. A later result was Stalinism, which destroyed not simply the aspirations of the revolution but most of its leading cadres.

Ninety per cent of Lenin's central committee were denounced as traitors and executed. Stalin killed more Bolsheviks than the Tsar. The murder of Trotsky, as Patenaude points out, was inevitable. Earlier antisemitic caricatures portraying him as an agent of Hitler had to be withdrawn lest they annoy the Führer after the Stalin-Hitler pact. Trotsky now became an agent of the US. Further change was unnecessary, since he had been bumped off before the US became a wartime ally.

Attempts to reform the system from within failed largely because the bureaucracy refused to surrender its power. Ultimately it exhausted itself and capitulated quietly and shamefully to the forces of global capitalism. The realm of necessity was never to be replaced by the realm of freedom, self-emancipation and human sovereignty as Marx had written. It came to an end - as Trotsky had calmly predicted - with the restoration of capitalism. Cromwell, Napoleon and Stalin had all created a system of rule that made restoration of the old order almost inevitable.

P.S.

* From Guardian.co.uk:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/oct/31/trotsky-stalin-service-patenaude>

* Tariq Ali's books include *The Protocols of the Elders of Sodom: And Other Essays* (Verso).