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Intellectual Affairs

Re-Assassination of Trotsky

Friday 8 July 2011, by [McLEMEE Scott](#) (Date first published: 8 July 2011).

Every so often, one scholar will assess another's book so harshly that it becomes legendary. The most durable example must be A.E. Housman, whose anti-blurbs retain their sting after a century and more. Housman is best-known for the verse in his collection *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). But classicists still remember his often pointed reviews of other philologists' editions of ancient poetry, and can sometimes quote snippets from memory.

"When I first open an edition of Persius," he writes in one of them, "I turn to VI 51 to see if the editor knows what part of speech adeo is. I regret to say that Mr. Summers thinks it is a verb." Or consider the following line, which kills two dons with one stone: "I imagine that Mr. Buechler, when he first perused Mr. Sidhaus's edition of the Aetna, must have felt something like Sin when she gave birth to Death."

Reviews in academic journals these days tend to be more gentle, if not more genteel – or at any rate, more circumspect. But the new issue of *The American Historical Review* contains a notice that will earn a place in the annals of the scholarly take-down. One historian says of another that he "commits 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." Its publisher (one of the most prominent university presses in the United States) "has placed its imprimatur upon a book that fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship."

And plenty more where that came from. Since reading the review last week, I have been in touch with both the reviewer and the review-ee — then spent a week trying to elicit a comment from the pertinent acquisitions editor at the press, who has gone either on vacation or into hiding.

The volume in question is *Trotsky: A Life* (Harvard University Press, 2009) by Robert Service, a professor of Russian history at the University of Oxford. He has also written biographies of Lenin and Stalin; they, too, were published by Harvard. It bears pointing out that Robert Service did not write either *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (1968) nor *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (1986), which are instead the work of Robert Conquest. Both have been fellows at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, based at Stanford University, which does not help in keeping them straight. (The next British historian of the Soviet Union named "Robert" to become prominent might consider using the initial "R" instead of his full first name.)

As it happens, the reviewer of Service's book, Bertrand M. Patenaude, is also a fellow at the Hoover Institution. His book *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary* (HarperCollins, 2009) appeared at the same time as Service's. Both volumes received very favorable notices in the British and American press when they appeared.

Trotsky was the object of both adoration and vilification during his lifetime, and remains so even now. A figure second only to Lenin in the leadership of the Russian Revolution, he was the founder of

the Red Army, the author of major statements of the Communist International, and an interlocutor in numerous cultural as well as political arguments throughout the first part of the 20th century. In polemics, he gave quite as brutally as he got. (The American cultural critic Dwight Macdonald said he felt honored to have inspired Trotsky's remark, "Everyone has the right to be stupid on occasion, but Comrade Macdonald abuses the privilege.") He was assassinated by a Stalinist agent in 1940, but his capacity to inspire argument seems perennial.

To place the dispute in *AHR* in context, it helps to take a quick look at the history of efforts to tell the story of the revolutionary's life. Over it looms Isaac Deutscher's monumental trilogy, which began with *The Prophet Armed* in 1954 and concluded with *The Prophet Outcast* in 1963. Deutscher was expelled from the Polish Communist Party for Trotskyism in the 1930s. As a biographer, he was clearly a partisan, but just as clearly he was no parrot. As a delegate to the first conference of the Fourth International (the worldwide Trotskyist organization) he voted against founding the new group because its forces were too weak. He withdrew from political activism and became a prolific journalist covering Soviet politics and history, mainly for British newspapers.

In writing his biography, Deutscher had full access to the Russian exile's papers at Harvard University. This included the section covering his years of exile (1929-40) which remained closed to the public until 1980. A deep background in Communist politics and considerable skill as a writer in his adopted language of English made Deutscher's trilogy one of the monumental biographies of the past half-century. In the meantime, the rest of Trotsky's papers at Harvard were made available to researchers; and then, just a few years later, the Soviet archives began opening up during glasnost. The old controversies (e.g., did Trotsky offer an alternative to Stalin, or was he just a totalitarian with a better prose style?) had fresh fuel.

No work of the post-Deutscherian era has quite displaced the trilogy as a standard reference, though Pierre Broué's biography, published in France in 1988, is its chief rival. (Broué, a French Trotskyist, also wrote substantial histories of the German revolution and the Spanish Civil War.) The best-known work drawing on the Soviet archives is *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary* by Dmitri Volkogonov, a general in the Red Army and later an adviser to Boris Yeltsin. His book, which appeared in English not long after Volkogonov's death in 1995, was one of a series of biographies of the Soviet "founding fathers" he wrote in the debunking spirit of the early post-Cold War period. Trotsky was, in Volkogonov's estimate, among "the architects of the Soviet totalitarian bureaucratic system."

Many another publication on Trotsky has also appeared, with some being scholarly and some merely lurid. You can now read Trotsky's notebook on Hegel. Or you can read about his affair with Frida Kahlo. It is an embarrassment of riches — except when it is just embarrassing, full stop.

To distinguish his book amidst all this wheat and chaff, Service writes in his preface that it is "the first full-length biography of Trotsky written by someone outside of Russia who is not a Trotskyist." The claim seems puzzling, because it is plainly and inarguably quite untrue. A competent editor would have saved him the embarrassment of making it. But Patenaude's assessment in the *American Historical Review* suggests that this is the tip of an iceberg of factual inaccuracies.

"I have counted more than four dozen [mistakes]," he writes. "Service mixes up the names of Trotsky's sons, misidentifies the largest political group in the first Duma in 1906, botches the name of the Austrian archduke assassinated at Sarajevo, misrepresents the circumstances of Nicholas II's abdication, gets backward Trotsky's position in 1940 on the United States' entry into World War II, and gives the wrong year of death of Trotsky's widow. Service's book is completely unreliable as a reference.... At times the errors are jaw-dropping. Service believes that Bertram Wolfe was one of Trotsky's 'acolytes' living with him in Mexico (pp. 441, 473), that André Breton was a 'surrealist

painter' whose 'pictures exhibited sympathy with the plight of the working people' (p. 453), and that Mikhail Gorbachev rehabilitated Trotsky in 1988, when in fact Trotsky was never posthumously rehabilitated by the Soviet government."

(Here let me intrude to add a mite to the historical record, since not many readers are likely to recognize the name of Bertram Wolfe, the prominent Sovietologist, who died in 1977. In the 1920s, as a leader of the American Communist Party, he wrote a pamphlet denouncing Trotsky and was involved with the purge of Trotsky's followers .. only to be purged himself a few months later. The characterization of him as an "acolyte" of Trotsky would certainly be an interesting discovery, if it were true. Service has confused him with Bernard Wolfe, a writer who did live with the exile for a time and later published a novel about Trotsky.)

"Service fails to examine in a serious way Trotsky's political ideas in his writings and speeches," writes Patenaude, "nor does it appear that he has always bothered to familiarize himself with them." As an example, he quotes the biographer's précis of Trotsky's book *Literature and Revolution* (1923). In it, Service writes: "Like fellow communist leaders, Trotsky wanted a high culture subordinate to the party's purposes. It would take many years, he assumed, before a 'proletarian culture' would be widely achieved." This is exactly wrong. The book was written to denounce the "proletarian culture" movement, and is not exactly ambiguous on the point.

Service's portrait of Trotsky insists that he was as cold-blooded toward his family as toward his enemies. An example is his account of Trotsky's emigration to England in 1902, when he managed to escape Siberian exile. "No sooner had he fathered a couple of children," he writes, "than he decided to run off. Few revolutionaries left such a mess behind them. Even so, he was acting within the revolutionary code of behavior." Service later refers to Trotsky "ditch[ing] his first wife," and quotes a passage from Trotsky's autobiography that seems to dismiss the whole episode by saying "Life separated us." The reviewer calls this "tamper[ing] with the available evidence" by "excising an inconvenient text." Trotsky's autobiography says that he and his wife agreed that he should flee the country. The full text of the sentence actually reads. "Life separated us, but nothing could destroy our friendship and our intellectual kinship" (p. 125). Patenaude also notes that the revolutionary's first wife remained a political supporter and "went to her death in the Great Terror as a Trotskyist." Service may prefer to characterize Trotsky as "ditch[ing] his first wife," but clearly she didn't see it that way.

This is but a sampling of the mistakes or instances of manhandled evidence that Patenaude charges in his piece. The review is about 2,000 words long, and also discusses a volume by David North called *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, published last year by Mehring Books, the publisher associated with something called the Socialist Equality Party, of which North is the (pseudonymous) leader.

Being, in many respects, a fairly strange person, I have a rather extensive familiarity with North's oeuvre, which includes treatises arguing that other Trotskyists were agents of the FBI or Soviet intelligence. His books do not often receive attention in *The American Historical Review*. That this one did seemed intriguing. I wanted to ask Patenaude about it. Did AHR ask him to review both titles? How did the editors respond to the review – did they change it at all? I also wanted to convey something that a historian told me after reading the review: "This is the most damning review I've ever seen in a history journal. There must be more to it than meets the eye – an element of personal motivation, payback of some kind." Surely other people were thinking the same thing. What were the circumstances of the assignment?

"I wrote the review at the request of the editors of the AHR," he told me by e-mail. "They asked me to review both Service's book and North's book. I did find this a little curious, because Service is a

major figure in the field of Soviet history and his *Trotsky* has been hailed by several reviewers as the definitive biography — so why dilute the effect by combining it with a slender, essentially self-published volume written by an avowed Trotskyist who devotes most of his pages to criticism of Service and his book?”

Patenaude says he was “initially inclined to turn down the review request” because he had not read either volume and knew that writing the piece would take him away from other work. “Nonetheless, after checking to make sure that David North’s book did not mention my own recent book on Trotsky, I accepted the invitation, fully expecting that I would add my voice to the chorus of praise for Service’s biography.”

But while reading the book, he “was surprised by the numerous factual errors ... and also by the author’s relentlessly prosecutorial tone. By the time I came to the end of the book, I realized that something was seriously amiss: how had such a sloppily researched and tendentiously written book received such glowing reviews from so many historians and other notable reviewers, both in the U.K. and the U.S.?”

Patenaude then turned to North’s volume, not quite half of which consists of a critique of Service’s biography. He expected “a predictable polemical diatribe from the radical left” but found that it “in fact hit the nail on the head in exposing the fundamental problems with Service’s biography.”

As for being “payback,” it sounds like the review leaves Patenaude in a fairly awkward situation: Service wrote a favorable review of his book, a blurb from which now appears on the cover of the paperback edition.

“Service and I also happen both to be fellows at the Hoover Institution — although he is here at Hoover only in summers, so I have met him only once, and very briefly, a few years ago.”

He acknowledges that the review may be unusually stringent for an academic journal – but the situation itself was unusual: “Having read at least a dozen enthusiastic reviews of Service’s book (some of them joint reviews of both our books), I started out expecting to produce a respectful academic review, but there could be no mincing words about the scandalous state of affairs I was confronted with upon reading his book.”

While making its points sharply, and without apology or delay, Patenaude’s review shows none of the aggressive *schadenfreude* exhibited in Housman’s legendary attacks. “Once I had read both books,” he told me, “and understood the circumstances of the situation, I felt I had no choice but to proceed the way I did.”

Before interviewing Patenaude, I wrote to Robert Service. Had he prepared a response to the *AHR* piece, or would he otherwise care to comment on it?

In no time there came a reply: “Eh, have you [a] copy of the review? Can’t comment on what I haven’t seen!”

I sent it to him. He did not respond. The silence became worrying. At the end of the day, I told my wife what had happened, and she said, “You’ve killed him.” (The thought had already crossed my mind.)

Three days later, after two more efforts to elicit a reply, Service wrote the following:

“It’s best for serious scholars to stay clear of abuse. The Trotskyists have used scurrilous and evasive tactics for nearly two years in attacking my Trotsky biography. Predictably they don’t like a

book which challenges their idolatry — and they have constantly failed to address the fundamental questions raised by the book. But the Western intelligentsia has always also included Trotsky romantics who want to think the best of Trotsky and who take a more or less uncritical approach to the history of the USSR. In a way they become entranced by him. This happened while Trotsky was alive; and judging from Patenaude's dyspeptic review, it is still alive and flourishing. Patenaude's own account of Trotsky's last years in Mexico treats him as a noble martyr. Well, to say the least, this is a questionable analysis — and I simply ask people to read my biography and make up their own minds.

"The minor factual blips in the first edition of my biography have been corrected; none of them undermines the kind of revision of Trotsky's reputation that I attempted after decades of the gentle treatment he received. What's required is joined-up thinking in our attitude not only to the Soviet past but also to our own present. Life's too short for a slanging match."

This is a response, if by no means an answer. Patenaude's book, which focuses on the final three years of Trotsky's life and his assassination in Mexico, is by no means a hagiography. (Any suggestion that he indulges in Trotskyist nostalgia will be dispersed upon reading it.) Nothing in the *AHR* piece is scurrilous or abusive. For that matter, the assessment of Service's book by left-wing academics such as Paul Le Blanc [1] and Hillel Ticktin [2] have been more forensic than polemical. The objections to Service's scholarship do not concern "minor factual blips" but charges that he has misrepresented evidence or failed to read the material being cited. And in any case, "factual blips" in sufficient quantity are indistinguishable from simple incompetence.

Nobody writing on Trotsky can expect to escape controversy, but that only heightens the need for scrupulous accuracy. Under the circumstances, I can only suggest that any research library that has added Service's book to its collection should consider acquiring David North's as well.

Finally: when one of the leading scholarly journals in the country publishes a complaint that a particular academic press "has placed its imprimatur upon a book that fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship," it seems reasonable to expect a reply. Over the course of eight days, I contacted five people (most of them at least twice) to ask for a comment on the review in *AHR*, and received no response of any kind. At times, silence is golden. In this case it's merely brazen.

By Scott McLemee

P.S.

* From Inside Higher Ed, July 8, 2011:

http://www.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee_on_trotsky_in_ahr

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF [Trotsky lives - A review of Robert Service's biography](#).

[2] <http://londonbookclub.co.uk/?p=762>