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# Trotsky lives - A review of Robert Service's biography

Thursday 31 December 2009, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 25 December 2009).

**A review of: Robert Service. *Trotsky: A Biography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 600 pages, including end notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.**

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Robert Service has written, to great acclaim, a new biography of Leon Trotsky. "Trotsky moved like a bright comet across the political sky," Service tells us. Along with Lenin and other leaders of the Russian Revolution associated with the Bolshevik - soon renamed Communist - party, "he first came to global attention in 1917. ... He lived a life full of drama played out with the world as his stage. The October Revolution changed the course of history, and Trotsky had a prominent role in the transformation. ... There is no denying Trotsky's exceptional qualities. He was an outstanding speaker, organizer and leader." (1, 3)

As the workers' councils (soviets) and earnest revolutionary ideals of the Bolsheviks gave way to the increasingly vicious bureaucratic dictatorship under Joseph Stalin, Trotsky became the most formidable critic of what was happening. He was taken seriously not simply by anti-Stalinists on the Left, "but by a large number of influential commentators who detested the Stalin regime. Trotsky's explanation of what took place since the fall of the Romanov monarchy in February 1917 took root in Western historical works," Service notes. At the same time, "Stalin depicted Trotsky as a traitor to the October Revolution, laid charges against him in the show-trials of 1936-8 and ordered Soviet intelligence agencies to assassinate him. In 1940 they succeeded." (2, 1)

Yet Stalin's Communism proved unable to sustain itself for even half a century afterward. With the global triumph of capitalism, however, there is also a multi-faceted global crisis of capitalism - assuming far-reaching dimensions that are ecological, social, cultural, political, military, and economic. Ten years ago the members of the United Nations promised the achievement by 2015 of Millennium Goals that would dramatically push back global poverty and hunger, also advancing the empowerment of women and the education of children, improvements in health care, improvements in environmental sustainability, improvements in "fair trade," and more. The modest gains toward realizing the UN Millennium Goals are more than balanced by setbacks and disappointments. An old socialist slogan of the 1970s - "Capitalism Fools Things Up" - seems quite relevant in the early 21<sup>st</sup>

century.

This is certainly an ideal moment for people to engage with one of the greatest revolutionaries of modern times. Service makes exciting claims: that his searches among archival holdings shed new light on the subject, and that he offers, for the first time, an objective account of this symbol of revolutionary Marxism. But in more ways than one, the book he has produced is not what it claims to be. In fact, what many reviewers have enthused over, in their discussions of Service's book, is the demolition of what they (and Service) consider to be a myth. As novelist and journalist Robert Harris approvingly comments in London's *Sunday Times*, "50 years after the last full-scale biography of Trotsky in English, Robert Service has turned his attention to this myth – and has, effectively, assassinated Trotsky all over again." [1]

## **A Cultural Phenomenon**

There is at least one problem here – the reviewer's claim that this is the first full-scale biography in English since the outstanding and sympathetic three-volume work by Isaac Deutscher which appeared in the 1950s and '60s (and has been recently republished by Verso). In fairness to Service, he himself actually asserts: "This book is the first full-length biography of Trotsky written by someone outside Russia who is not a Trotskyist." (xxi)

However phrased, the claim is simply not true. In 1975, Joel Carmichael produced a work of about 500 pages, *Trotsky: An Appreciation of His Life*. In 1977 Robert Payne's *The Life and Death of Trotsky* (close to 500 pages) appeared. In 1979, Ronald Segal's over 400-page biography, *Leon Trotsky*, was published. Service's purported biographical assassination comes in at slightly more than each of these, but not by much. Service's emphasis on not being a Trotskyist is belied by the fact that these three works are all non-Trotskyist — and two reject fundamentally (as does Service) all that Trotsky stood for.

For that matter, over the past couple of years, preceding the appearance of Service's book, there have been three additional major studies, all critical-to-hostile – Ian Thatcher's *Trotsky* (2002), Geoff Swain's *Trotsky* (2006), and Bertrand Patenaude's *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary* (2009). It is remarkable that so many critical books have appeared on Trotsky's life. If one is willing to add a major Russian work translated into English in 1995, there is Dmitri Volkoganov's hostile *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary*, which received a reception quite similar to that accorded to Service's new volume. One might ask why such obsessive debunking must go on and on ... and on.

This is hardly a problem for Simon Sebag Montefiore (whose help Service acknowledges in his preface). An upper-class historian, novelist, and authority on Stalin, Montefiore complains in the Conservative *Daily Telegraph* that "Trotsky, like Mao and to some extent Lenin, has long been one of those Communist titans who, for some, achieved the status of fashionable radical saints, even in the democracies that they would have destroyed in an orgy of bloodletting." While "Lenin and Mao have been recast as brutal monsters not unlike Stalin himself," only now has Trotsky also been able to join the pantheon of Red monsters – presented by Service in all his "ugly egotism and unpleasant, overweening arrogance, the belief in and enthusiastic practice of killing on a colossal scale." [2]

The more politically neutral *Times* offers a more delicious characterization by reviewer Richard Harris, hardly a Tory but rather an enthusiastic supporter of the former "New Labor" Prime Minister Tony Blair. Perhaps drawing from his own experience, he writes: "If one can imagine the most obnoxious middle-class student radical one has ever met — bitter, sneering, arrogant, selfish, cocky, callous, callow, blinkered and condescending — and if one freezes that image, applies a pair of pince-nez and transports it back to the beginning of the last century, then one has Trotsky." [3]

In the *Wall Street Journal*, scholar and human rights activist Joshua Rubenstein offers a mixed judgment. While praising Service's "vivid" and "long overdue" biography as "approaching Trotsky without emotional or ideological attachment" (which could be the understatement of the year), he also accurately notes that Service "slips into personal animus that is sometimes out of place," and that the book "hardly discusses Trotsky's writings, either as a Marxist theoretician or as an accomplished and independent journalist" – which is a remarkable limitation, given the centrality of such things to all that Trotsky was. [4] What would one make of biographies about Newton or Darwin or Einstein that hardly discussed their scientific theories? This is a fatal limitation: one cannot understand and assess Trotsky without a more serious-minded engagement with his ideas.

At least one reviewer, Tariq Ali, in the left-leaning *Guardian* simply slams "Service's plodding account in which some of the allegations are so trivial that they are best ignored." He adds, as if amplifying Rubenstein's point about the failure to deal with Trotsky's actual ideas: "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." [5]

## **The Actual Book**

Engaging seriously with the actual book under review, one cannot agree fully with the judgments of the reviewers just cited. It is somewhat better, and much worse, than one might be led to believe. Service's study is really quite readable. The prose is clear, and the story interesting. It follows the basic outline sketched by Trotsky himself in his literary masterpiece *My Life*, supplemented by Deutscher's brilliant trilogy – *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast*. This provides a coherent structure, which Service seeks in a workman-like manner to compress into a more succinct, relatively fast-paced narrative.

Service certainly dispenses large dollops of the negative judgment regarding Trotsky, the stuff that many reviews on the right and left focus on. Debating about Trotsky with Christopher Hitchens, under the auspices of the Hoover Institution, Service characterized the revolutionary as "the most amazingly brilliant man . . . but such a dreadful mistake of a life and a career." [6] That matches the thrust of his speaking tours, and of all the publicity around the book.

Nonetheless, there remains the strong influence of Deutscher's magisterial biography, the considerable researches from post-1960s social historians on the Russian Revolution (essentially corroborating John Reed's exuberantly sympathetic eyewitness account, *Ten Days That Shook the World*), and the power of Trotsky's own writings. All push into the pages of Service's biography, and they push in a different direction than that in which he himself prefers to travel.

More than this, in some ways — not in all, as we shall see — Service proves himself a capable historian. He spent many years researching Lenin, producing a capable if increasingly hostile three-volume political summary, "capped" by a sadly inferior (though widely lauded) biography. This has given him a fair sense of the shape of the history of the Russian revolutionary movement leading up to the 1917 Revolution. This stands him in good stead as he contextualizes much of Trotsky's story. In addition to this, and in addition to the use of a considerable amount of secondary literature, he actually spent time mining the archives and has come up with new material.

Service makes much of this archival exploration, promising new revelations supposedly culled from earlier drafts of *My Life* and other writings. While there are, in fact, no stunningly defamatory

“revelations” forthcoming from the archives, there are insights offered from – for example – correspondence between Trotsky and his first wife Alexandra. A youthful Trotsky, imprisoned for revolutionary activities, writes to his lover: “Mikhailovski in an article about Lassalle says that one can be more frank with the woman one loves than with oneself; this is to a certain degree true but such frankness is possible only in a personal conversation but not always, only in special and exceptional circumstances.” Engaging with such correspondence, Service comments aptly: “Then and later he favored extreme images and striking turns of phrase. This was no artificial invention. It flowed from the personality of someone who did not feel alive unless he could communicate with others.” (52, 53)

At the same time, there is a remarkable sloppiness that crops up in this book. For example, Service speculates that Trotsky’s father hired a rabbi to teach his young son the Torah (24) – but his source is the short account by Max Eastman in *Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth*, which makes it clear that the father hired a private tutor — one who had a beard, to be sure, but who was an agnostic scholar, not a rabbi. This matches the relatively secular inclinations that Service acknowledges were characteristic of Trotsky’s father. It is odd that, with no more evidence to cite than Eastman, Service converts this into Jewish religious instruction. [7]

At times, his “facts” are simply wrong. Service tells us that Trotsky “spoke out against ‘individual terror’ in 1909 when the Socialist-Revolutionaries murdered the police informer Evno Azev, who had penetrated their Central Committee.” (113) But this is impossible. Azev most definitely was a police spy who held a position of immense authority within the Socialist-Revolutionary organization: coordinating the terrorist assassinations carried out by the Socialist-Revolutionaries. This was a tactic which Trotsky and other Marxists of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party absolutely opposed. But Azev himself, after being exposed, escaped to Germany, where he was imprisoned until 1917 and apparently died of kidney disease in 1918. [8] Why would Trotsky denounce a murder that never happened? Of course he didn’t. But it certainly undermines one’s confidence in Service’s ability to get things right.

There are also examples of important facts being left out of the account. One of the most disconcerting comes up in Service’s seemingly detailed account of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. The Bolshevik Revolution had come to power promising “peace, bread, land” and one of the highest priorities for the new soviet government was to extricate Russia from the devastation of the First World War, with Trotsky as the chief peace negotiator with the Germans, “moving like a weaver’s shuttle between Brest-Litovsk and the Russian capital,” as Service nicely phrases it. (208) The German military sought to impose a very nasty settlement, which the revolutionaries were loathe to accept. Some argued for waging “revolutionary war” against German imperialism while Lenin insisted that the regime must sign the German peace terms, however odious. Trotsky took a middle position – “neither peace nor war” – in hopes that through drawing the negotiations out and peppering them with widely-publicized revolutionary speeches, the proletarian ferment visible in Central Europe would be transformed into workers’ uprisings. Service notes that Trotsky first won a majority (even the anxious and skeptical Lenin went along). But then, he tells us, Lenin somehow – presumably through persuasive conversations and lobbying among his comrades – was finally able to secure a majority for making peace. How did this happen? What Service inexplicably fails to mention is that the German military, losing patience, launched a massive and successful offensive which demonstrated the hollowness of the “revolutionary war” notion and the inadequacy of Trotsky’s compromise position. The German High Command then put forward even more odious demands which Lenin now had little difficulty in persuading a majority to accept. [9]

There are a number of surprising examples of more minor sloppiness. For example, André Breton, the poet and theorist of surrealism who sympathized with Trotsky, is consistently but incorrectly identified as a “surrealist painter.” (399, 453, 461) The anti-Trotskyist Bertram Wolfe is mistaken for

Trotsky adherent Bernard Wolfe (441). At one point Service tells us: "Instead of calling his first son after his own father, he and Natalya had chosen the name Sergei." (201) But of course Sergei Sedov was the second son and Lev Sedov the first, as Service himself documents elsewhere in the book.

More than once such sloppiness is exposed by Service himself. Describing the 1916 voyage of Trotsky and his family to New York on a Spanish steamship, Service tells us that "Trotsky claimed they travelled second class." This is "exposed" as "a silly fib," since - while paying for second-class tickets - it was found that the second-class berths were overbooked, "and they were given a first-class cabin at no extra charge." But according to the footnote Service offers, Trotsky was telling this "silly fib" to himself, since it appeared (apparently as a mistaken recollection) in his 1935 diary, not meant for publication and only published after his death. In the same passage, Service asserts that the Trotskys "did not mingle with passengers from the lowest decks," feeling "no impulse to spend time talking to workers." Yet a few lines later, Service tells us that, in discussions about World War I, "Trotsky only met one person who appealed to him. This was a housemaid from Luxembourg." In the next paragraph, Service tells us, an entry in Trotsky's diary indicates that his sons "made friends with the Spanish sailors, who told them that they would soon get rid of the monarchy in Madrid," which - one would assume - also appealed to Trotsky. (153)

## **Personality and Politics**

As already noted, there is a significant amount of anti-Trotsky editorializing, especially concentrated in the book's introductory and concluding sections, but interlarded as sniping assertions, speculations, and projections throughout much of the biography. The book's purpose, Service insists, "is to dig up the buried life" of a man whose "self-serving account of Stalin and Stalinism deeply influenced the discourse of writers both left and right," but who had himself demonstrated a "lust for dictatorship and terror," and, in fact, positively "reveled in terror." (The faint-hearted need not fear - the book never really presents such raw lust and reveling!) Trotsky's character, according to Service, involved the following traits, to take some of those offered in the book's index: alienating others, arrogance, aversion to sentimentality, bossiness, careless about people's attitudes to him, dislike of losing at games, egotism, impatience with stupidity, insensitivity, perfectionism, prickliness, Puritanism, temper, vanity, self-centered, will to dominate. (4, 499, 497, 597) Nor is this all wrong.

Isaac Deutscher also affirmed that Trotsky sometimes displayed a "prickly and overbearing character and a lack of talent for teamwork." Trotsky's Bolshevik comrade Anatoly Lunacharsky offered an acidly frank pen-portrait in 1923: "His colossal arrogance and an inability or unwillingness to show any human kindness or to be attentive to people, the absence of that charm which always surrounded Lenin, condemned Trotsky to a certain loneliness." Others, including Service, indicate that Trotsky could indeed show kindness and great charm, and that over time he mellowed somewhat - and yet these less endearing characteristics never vanished. From the archives he digs out correspondence to Trotsky's second wife Natalya from Lev Sedov, Trotsky's capable revolutionary-activist son, complaining in 1936 "that all of Papa's failings are getting worse with age: his intolerance, hot temper, teasing, even crudity and desire to offend," and that "Papa never recognizes when he's in the wrong. That's why he can't bear criticism. When something is said or written to him with which he disagrees he either ignores it entirely or gets back with a harsh reply." (230, 431-432) Yet other qualities that Lunacharsky stressed also persisted - "the remarkable coherence and literary skill of his phrasing, the richness of imagery, scalding irony, his soaring pathos, his rigid logic, clear as polished steel," and the fact that "there is not a drop of vanity in him, he is totally indifferent to any title or to the trappings of power." And yet, Lunacharsky concluded, "Trotsky treasures his historical role and would probably make any personal sacrifice . . . in order to



go down in human memory surrounded by the aureole of a genuine revolutionary leader.” [10]  
(Some see this latter quality as a flaw, others as a strength.)

While there is overlap between much of this and aspects of Service’s description, essential elements in his negative characterization (charges of hypocrisy, ingrained authoritarianism, “reveling in terror”) seem to flow from the author’s desire to turn people against a serious consideration of Trotsky’s orientation, not from the research he has done. One suspects it precedes that research and is rooted in his ideological and institutional commitments. While Service is not up-front about his own politics, in the first sentence of the book’s preface he forthrightly describes the Hoover Institution as his “base.” For many years it has been widely known for its conservative orientation, and Service enjoys the status of a highly esteemed Senior Fellow there.

The Hoover Institution’s mission statement affirms “the principles of individual, economic, and political freedom; private enterprise; and representative government were fundamental to the vision of the Institution’s founder,” the conservative U.S. President Herbert Hoover, who believed deeply in laissez-faire capitalism. “By collecting knowledge, generating ideas, and disseminating both, the Institution seeks to secure and safeguard peace, improve the human condition, and limit government intrusion into the lives of individuals.” The influence on Service of this perspective was suggested during his Trotsky debate with Christopher Hitchens at the Hoover Institution itself. “With a centralized state-run economy,” he argued, even with “a somewhat more astute character such as Trotsky, . . . it was an absolute certainty that you couldn’t . . . get the kind of results that you wanted for popular consumption such as you can have under a market economy.” [11]

Whatever the motivation and underlying ideology, all too often we find Service engaged in an odd game of scoring of nasty personal points. It gets in the way of what one might expect from a serious biographer. Here are four examples among many.

- In reaction to Trotsky’s love letters to Alexandra, in which he expresses doubts and depression, Service informs us that “unconsciously Trotsky was trying to induce Alexandra to do more than love him: he wanted her to understand and look after him and perhaps this could be achieved by admissions of weakness.” How does Service know that Trotsky’s admission was an insincere calculation? An admission of weakness to someone you love is not necessarily a manipulative ploy. Service’s put-down of Trotsky here is out of harmony with his seeming acceptance of Trotsky’s admission to Alexandra that “one can be more frank with the woman one loves than with oneself.” (52)

- Sometimes, Service’s eagerness to be critical interjects a superficiality cutting across a more substantial and plausible criticism that could be made. As a very young revolutionary, when he and his comrades had been arrested, Trotsky took the lead in a rather pointless challenge to prison authorities that landed him and his comrades all in solitary confinement. “As with several such episodes of daring in his life, Trotsky did not include this information in his published memoirs.” But the initial hot-headed “heroism” had been unnecessary. After the punishment, we are told, Trotsky and his comrades chose the path of peaceful cooperation. Service prefers the following: “It had to be dragged out of him by admiring writers. Although he liked to cut a dash in public, he disliked boasting: he preferred others to do the job for him.” (56) A less convoluted explanation, however, is that Trotsky was by no means proud of such immature and pointless “daring.” Perhaps he was a little ashamed.

- During his exile in Vienna, Trotsky is hit in rapid succession by a series of troubling events – the death of his mother, a painful accident at the dentist from which he gradually recovers, the sudden appearance of his eleven year old daughter from his first marriage (after five years of not seeing her), who visits from the Ukraine in the company of his father. Trotsky then suffers an illness

brought on by stress. His father goes with him to the doctor. "Perhaps Trotsky had taken his father along because he needed him to pay for the consultation," Service speculates. "His letters [neither quoted nor cited] hint at a further motive. Trotsky seems to have appreciated being accompanied by someone devoted to his interests. He was again the center of attention, and the joint visit to the Viennese professor restored his spirits." (123-124) Why turn this all into an example of Trotsky being egotistical and self-centered? In fact, it might make sense for a father to want to be there for his son under trying circumstances, and it might be natural for even a person in his 30s to value and need the company and reassurance and caring of his father. In the 1920s, Max Eastman noted: "Trotsky is proud of his father.... He loves to talk about him." [12]

- There is a parenthetical comment about Trotsky and Karl Radek in 1915: "They were almost friends, insofar as either man had any." (145) Yet Service himself notes close friendships that Trotsky had with Adolf Joffe and Christian Rakovsky, and – among those who were outside of the Trotskyist movement – one could add Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer as well as Otto Rühle and Alice Rühle-Gerstel. There are other friendships one could mention (in addition to friendships with certain members of his family). [13]

Nonetheless, Service is enough of an historian that often the material takes over the man, drawing the narrative into a clear account of what Trotsky and other revolutionaries actually thought and attempted and accomplished. In describing the months leading up to the October/November Revolution of 1917, describing the process of convergence of the most committed revolutionaries into the Bolshevik party, he gives a true sense of the realities. He quotes the future Bolshevik Moisei Uritsky who was powerfully impressed (as were many) by Trotsky, freshly returned from exile and showing himself to be one of the most eloquent, passionate, brilliant mass orators: "Here's a great revolutionary who's arrived and one gets the feeling that Lenin, however clever he may be, is starting to fade next to the genius of Trotsky." Service writes:

*"Lenin felt no worry about having personal rivals on the political far left. He needed and wanted active, talented associates such as Trotsky. He and Trotsky agreed on a broad agenda for revolution in Russia. The Provisional Government had to be done away with and a "workers' government" instituted. The era of European socialist revolution had arrived. The Great War would be terminated only when the far leftists came to power and repudiated capitalism, imperialism, nationalism and militarism. There had to be immediate basic reform in Russia. The peasantry should take over the land of the Imperial family, the state and the Orthodox Church. Workers should control the factories. . . . All spoke approvingly of the power of the masses. There was agreement that workers and peasants should be encouraged to remake life as they wanted. Factories, offices and farms ought to be reorganized. Differences remained among Bolsheviks – and they were about to be brought to the surface the moment the party seized power. But between February and October the disputes were containable. . . . [T]he Provisional Government [of pro-capitalist and moderate socialist politicians] had to be overthrown in favor of a revolutionary administration. Fundamental social and economic reform would then be implemented. The European war would be brought to an end. Revolution in Russia would be followed by the overturning of the ruling classes throughout Europe. Failure to act would be a disaster. The counter-revolutionary elements in the former Russian Empire were waiting for their opportunity to strike."* (167-169)

All of this gives a good sense of how things were – in the thinking of Lenin, Trotsky, and others who rallied to make the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

## **Problems of Communism**

The problem with this, from Service's standpoint (and that of the Hoover Institution), is that the revolutionary socialist goals are simply impossible to achieve. Presumably, the only reasonable path involves supporting private enterprise and limiting government intrusion into our social life, as explained in the Hoover mission statement. Violation of such strictures results in chaos, and as a consequence would-be revolutionaries, still determined to force their ideals onto an unwilling society, inevitably construct a totalitarian order. This defines the story that Service feels he must tell.

Service's view was sharply challenged in his debate with ex-Trotskyist Christopher Hitchens. The most powerful forces initiating a brutal civil war against the Bolshevik Revolution had little desire, as Hitchens put it, to replace the workers' and peasants' soviets by "a parliamentary democracy with an independent judiciary." He noted that "if Trotsky's Red Army had not won the Russian Civil War, then the word for fascism . . . was probably going to be the Russian word instead of an Italian word." Service squirmed a bit: "It's a little exaggerated, but it's pretty fair that the Whites had officers who were vicious, carried out a brutal civil war against the Reds." To which Hitchens snorted: "Brought the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* [an anti-Semitic classic concocted by Russian reactionaries] to Europe in their backpacks when they left. Not doing us any favors. Brings the German [version] of Fascism with it!" Throughout much of Europe, varieties of fascism and vicious dictatorships received support from the upper-classes to create a barrier to the spread of revolution. [22] The splendid literary and social critic Irving Howe, another ex-Trotskyist who avoided tacking quite so far rightward, felt compelled to insist thirty years ago that Trotsky "must be regarded as one of the great writers of his time," and went on to specify:

*"Perhaps nowhere else do these talents shine forth so brightly as in Trotsky's writings in the early 1930s on the rise of Nazism. These consist of articles and pamphlets composed hurriedly in exile: there is no effort to work out a theoretical synthesis, partly because Trotsky's major objective is to offer tactical guidance for preventing Hitler's victory and partly because the phenomenon of Nazism is still new. But such brilliant works . . . contain within them many of the elements needed for a theory of Nazism. ... Trotsky's main purpose in these writings was not to provide a full-scale theory of fascism but to stir the German left toward concerted action. With blazing sarcasm and urgency - he never could be patient toward fools - he attacked the preposterous policy of the German Communists [following Stalin], who in their ultra-left "third period" were declaring the Social Democrats to be "social fascists" representing a greater danger than the Nazis. Trotsky kept insisting on what seems utterly clear and simple: that only a united front ("march separately, strike together") of the Communists and Social Democrats could stop Hitler. ... Had Trotsky's advice been followed ... the world might have been spared some of the horrors of our century; at the very least, the German working class would have gone down in battle the than allowing the Nazi thugs to take power without resistance."* [23]

How could it be that Service would shrug this off?

With a similar minimal engagement with the documentary sources, Service also shrugs off the efforts to build up the Fourth International - a global network of revolutionary socialist organizations, quite small but to which Trotsky devoted the final years of his life. Howe sees him in these years as a figure of "flawed greatness ... an all too human figure," who "alternates between periods of ferocious work and sluggish withdrawal. He feels guilty with regards to his children, all of whose lives, in one way or another, have been sacrificed in the political struggle. He is afraid that he may die before finishing his revolutionary task. He is overcome by the incongruity between the magnitude of his political perspective and the paltriness of his political means." Nonetheless,



“caustic and proud, shaking off his personal griefs in order to return to the discipline of work,” he tries to do the very best he can – particularly in what Howe sees as the “ill-starred venture” of the Fourth International. [24]

Service cannot allow himself such critical generosity. There are a scattering of little nuggets drawn from the archives – although, in some cases already published and long-available to the rest of us. A genuinely revolutionary approach of socialist organizations toward workers in struggle should be “not to command the workers but only to help them, to give them suggestions, to arm them with facts, ideas, factory papers, special leaflets, and so on.” The need to make revolutionary socialist organizations “habitable for workers” (not just intellectual and white-collar workers) was a primary concern for Trotsky. “Many intellectuals and half-intellectuals terrorize the workers by some abstract generalities and paralyze the will toward activity,” he cautioned. “A functionary of a revolutionary party should have in the first place a good ear, and only in the second place a good tongue.” (443) [25]

For the most part, however, Service is satisfied with superficialities (“global Trotskyism was a lot less substantial than Stalin imagined”) and snide inaccuracies: “He had sealed himself in the cave of his fundamental beliefs. He allowed no questioning of them. He bullied his followers who dared to object; and he preferred them to leave the Fourth International than to cause him bother.” (441, 472) Whatever limitations one sees in Trotsky’s political practice in the Fourth International, serious histories of the Fourth International as well as a number of memoirs and primary sources, do not confirm Service’s glib characterization. [26]

Service focuses on Trotsky’s 1939-1940 polemics with James Burnham to make his point about Trotsky’s sterile bullying. These were part of a fierce factional battle in the U.S. Socialist Workers Party that – when examined in its fullness – actually refutes the point Service is making. This is documented and succinctly presented in Isaac Deutscher’s biography:

*“The American Trotskyists had split into a “majority” which, led by James P. Cannon, accepted Trotsky’s view, and a “minority” which followed Burnham and [Max] Shachtman. Trotsky urged all of them to exercise tact and tolerance; and while he encouraged the “Cannonites” to conduct the argument against Burnham and Shachtman vigorously, he also warned them that the Stalinist agents in their ranks would seek to exacerbate the quarrel; and he advised them to allow the minority to express itself freely and even to act as an organized faction within the S.W.P. “If someone should propose ... to expel comrade Burnham,” he gave notice, “I would oppose it energetically.” Even after the minority had held its own National Convention, Trotsky still counseled the majority not to treat this as an excuse for expulsions.”* [27]

As it turned out, the political differences were so sharp that Burnham, Shachtman, and their co-thinkers felt a need to establish their own separate organization. The biographers of the two provide essential information. “In April 1940 Shachtman left the Socialist Workers Party and founded his own Workers Party on the basis of his own conceptions,” notes Peter Drucker in his left-wing study of Shachtman. They simply did not want to be constrained by the limitations of Trotsky’s perspectives, unlike him seeing the Soviet Union under Stalin as not simply needing an anti-bureaucratic political revolution but, in fact, representing a new oppressive form of society as bad as capitalism (and some would soon say worse than capitalism). This new group was almost immediately jolted by the discovery that one of its key theorists was as “bad” as Trotsky had said he was. In his conservative study of James Burnham (who soon enlisted in the Central Intelligence Agency and became an editor of the right-wing *National Review*), Daniel Kelly notes that “on top of his disillusionment with Trotsky, Burnham now seemed uncertain about the value of the movement and even of socialism.” Within weeks, he had abandoned the Workers Party, explaining to his stunned comrades “that he could no longer accept Marxism, whose ideas modern historians,

economists, and anthropologists had shown to be false.” [28] It is really not at all surprising that that he and Trotsky had come into such sharp conflict.

Shachtman and his comrades were eventually followed in their exit from Trotsky’s Fourth International by others having the somewhat different perspective that the Soviet Union represented simply a new variant of capitalism (state capitalism). Yet the independent currents – generating an impressive body of political thought and analysis – nonetheless retained a positive attitude to Trotsky, in stark contrast to Burnham (and Service). [29]

## **Political Choices and Permanent Revolution**

Fifteen years after his break, Burnham would denounce the Trotsky biography of Isaac Deutscher. Near the beginning of the review, he offered a list of Trotsky’s sins that would certainly not surprise Service: pride, subjectivism, impatience, and inhumanity. He conceded that Deutscher’s work was well-researched study and filled in “many gaps,” and that it showed Trotsky’s considerable talents but “conscientiously displays, also, Trotsky’s weaknesses, not only those major flaws that I have already named, but the human failings that were sometimes the obverse of his talents.” Nonetheless, the biography was an “intellectual disaster.” The reason was ideological: “Mr. Deutscher writes from a point of view that accepts and legitimizes the Bolshevik revolution.” Burnham lamented that “the minds of many of our university students and opinion-makers are being deeply formed” by Trotsky’s perspectives which Deutscher sought to convey. “Not all the scholarly references from all the libraries,” according to Burnham, “are enough to wash out the Bolshevik stain.” [30]

Service – with the assistance of the Hoover Institution and to the applause of many pro-capitalist intellectuals – seeks once and for all to un-do such damage. A central point of this biography, repeated over and over again, was that Trotsky’s orientation does not represent any meaningful alternative to Stalinism. Service informs us at the beginning of the book that “Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin shared more than they disagreed about.” Near the end of the book he insists that Trotsky “was close to Stalin in intentions and practice.” (3, 497) The same theme is sounded more than once in-between – even as the evidence (sometimes the evidence he himself presents) suggests otherwise.

There were plenty of informed people of the time, both Trotskyist and non-Trotskyist, who saw things quite differently. Among these was the eloquent powerhouse of British empire and conservatism Winston Churchill, who in conversations and writings of the 1930s emphasized the differences between the revolutionary Trotsky and the much more reasonable Stalin. The old counter-revolutionary expressed himself most candidly in a 1938 private conversation with the Soviet Ambassador to Britain. This was when Stalin’s bloody purge against “the anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” was going full throttle. Service himself offers the story in passing. “I hate Trotsky!” Churchill told Stalin’s man. “I’ve kept an eye on his activities for some time. He’s Russia’s evil genius, and it is a very good thing that Stalin has got even with him.” (465)

Indeed, the cigar-chomping aristocrat had said as much publicly a year earlier, with all the self-satisfied conservative eloquence he could muster:

*“Once again he has become the exponent of the purest sect of Communism. Around his name gather the new extremists and doctrinaires of world-revolution. Upon him is turned the full blast of Soviet malignity. ... The name of Lenin, the doctrine of Marx, are invoked against him at the moment when he frantically endeavors to exploit them. Russia is regaining strength as the virulence of Communism abates in her blood. The process may be cruel, but it is not morbid. It is a need of self-preservation which impels the Soviet Government to extrude Trotsky and his fresh-distilled poisons.”* [31]

This, shorn of its excess and its tacit embrace of Stalin, is the image that Service also offers us, despite a far more positive sub-text inadvertently pushing up like grass, flowers, and dandelions through the cracks of his somewhat barren account.

In the youth radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s, many young activists read the condensed little collection of writings edited by Isaac Deutscher and George Novack, widely circulated in paperback, entitled *The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology*. In the introduction to that volume, Deutscher described Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution – to which Service gives remarkably short shrift – as “a profound and comprehensive conception in which all the overturns that the world has been undergoing (in this late capitalist era) are represented as interconnected and interdependent parts of a single revolutionary process.” In the theory of permanent revolution, we see the dynamic interplay of democracy and class struggle, the self-activity of the masses of laboring and oppressed people reaching for their own liberation within, while at the same time straining beyond, the context of global capitalism. Three elements can be found in Trotsky's theory: (a) the possibility and necessity, under the right circumstances, of democratic and immediate struggles spilling over into the struggle for working-class political power, (b) culminating in a transitional period going in the direction of socialism, (c) which can be realized only through the advance of similar struggles around the world. In fact, these elements permeate Trotsky's orientation from his youth to his death. “To put it in the broadest terms,” Deutscher emphasized, “the social upheaval of our century is seen by Trotsky as global in scope and character, even though it proceeds on various levels of civilization and in the most diverse social structures, and even though its various phases are separated from one another in time and space.” [32]

Young activists hoping for a better world may be drawn to the vitality of Trotsky, despite Service's efforts. It is possible that some of them may even get their introduction to Trotsky by reading his book. The assumptions of the Hoover Institution may, after all, turn out to be less relevant than the life and ideas of Trotsky in face of what is actually happening in the world. The young activists may conclude that they are living in the age of permanent revolution, and then commit their lives to making it so.

**by Paul Le Blanc**

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## Footnotes

[1] Robert Harris, “Trotsky: A Biography by Robert Service,” *Sunday Times*, October 18, 2009: [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article6876331.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article6876331.ece).

[2] Simon Sebag, Montefiore, “Trotsky by Robert Service: review,” *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 2009: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/6271804/Trotsky-by-Robert-Service-review.html>.

[3] Harris, cited in footnote 1.

[4] Joshua Rubenstein, “Revolutionary's Road,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 2009: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704431804574538603020283292.html>

[5] Tariq Ali, "The Life and Death of Trotsky," *The Guardian*, 31 October 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/oct/31/trotsky-stalin-service-patenaude>. Available on ESSF: [The life and death of Trotsky](#). While Ali's leftist dissent is uncommon in "mainstream" sources, there has been a negative chorus forthcoming among the marginalized left – with critiques available on-line from Peter Taaffe, David North, Paul Hampton, Dave Sherry, and others. Each raises points worth considering (although I am not persuaded by North's argument that Service is cynically "making an appeal to anti-Semites" in the way he writes about Trotsky).

[6] "Trotsky Per Hitchens and Service," Hoover Institution, July 28, 2009, <http://www.hoover.org/multimedia/uk/52383062.html>.

[7] Max Eastman, *Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth* (New York: Greenberg, 1925), 26-27.

[8] Nurit Schleifman, "Azef, Evno Fishelevich (1869-1918)," *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution*, ed. by Harold Shukman (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1988), 303-304.

[9] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed, Trotsky: 1879-1921* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1954), 381-386.

[10] Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky, *Revolutionary Silhouettes*, with an introduction by Isaac Deutscher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 21, 62, 65, 67, 68. Service chooses not to acknowledge Trotsky's poignant description of his son, Leon Sedov – Son, Friend, Fighter, written on behalf of himself and Natalya upon a death clouded by mysterious circumstances, in which Trotsky says "he was our son, truthful, devoted, loving, . . . he had, as no one else on earth, become part of our life, entwined in all its roots, our co-thinker, our co-worker, our guard, our counselor, our friend." (Leon Trotsky, *Portraits Political and Personal* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977], 190.)

[11] "Mission Statement," Hoover Institution, <http://www.hoover.org/about/mission>; "Trotsky Per Hitchens and Service," cited in footnote 6.

[12] Eastman, 7.

[13] Elsewhere in the volume, Service acknowledges Joffe and Rakovsky, among others, as close friends of Trotsky. In addition, see Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer, *From Syndicalism to Trotskyism: Writings of Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer* (London: Porcupine Press, 2000), and Alice Rühle-Gerstel, "No Verses for Trotsky: A Diary (1937)," *Encounter*, April 1982, 27-41. Sara Weber also writes of her friendship (seemingly not an unusual one) with Trotsky and his companion Natalia in "Recollections of Trotsky," *Modern Occasions*, Spring 1972.

[14] "Trotsky Per Hitchens and Service," cited in footnote 6. Similar points are made, with substantial documentation, by Arno J. Mayer – *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The 'Final Solution' In History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998). Also see the second volume – dealing with the civil war – of William Henry Chamberlin's 1935 classic *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), and David S. Fogelsohn, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism, 1917-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[15] On this complex question, see Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (London: Writers and Readers, 1984), 115-156, Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet*

*Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), and Paul Le Blanc, "Bolshevism and Revolutionary Democracy," *New Politics*, Winter 2009, 45-52; available on ESSF: [Review: Bolshevism and revolutionary democracy](#)

[16] Service, 349; Leon Trotsky, *My Life, An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 462, 466, 479, 521.

[17] Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 47, 49, 48.

[18] *Ibid.*, 45-46.

[19] Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1937), 56, 112. The quotation from Marx can be found in *The Germany Ideology* (1845) – for the full excerpt see Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 427; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 37. One could write a substantial and remarkable doctoral dissertation on the evolution of Trotsky's analysis that culminated in *The Revolution Betrayed* – and fortunately, someone recently has done just that. See Thomas Marshall Twiss, *Trotsky and the Problem of Soviet Bureaucracy* (University of Pittsburgh, 2009).

[20] "The Totalitarian Defeatist in the Kremlin," *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1937-38* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), 447; "Answers to the New York Herald-Tribune," *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936-37* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 413.

[21] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921-1929* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), 51, 53, 54, 78.

[22] "Trotsky Per Hitchens and Service," cited in footnote 6.

[23] Irving Howe, *Leon Trotsky* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 136, 140. The writings referred to here can be found in Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971).

[24] Howe, 134, 135, 143.

[25] "The Social Composition of the Party," *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936-37* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 489, 490.

[26] See Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists* (London: Ink Links, 1977); George Breitman, "The Rocky Road to the Fourth International, 1933-38" in Anthony Marcus, ed., *Malcolm X and the Third American Revolution: The Writings of George Breitman* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005), 299-352; James P. Cannon, "Internationalism and the SWP," in *Speeches to the Party* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 67-91. Useful material (some of uneven quality) can also be found in the pages of the journal *Revolutionary History* – see <http://www.revolutionaryhistory.co.uk/>.

[27] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929-1940* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963), 475-476.



[28] Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 109; Daniel Kelly, *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World, A Life* (Wilmington DL: ISI Books, 2002), 84-86.

[29] See Sean Matgamna, ed., *The Fate of the Russian Revolution: Lost Texts of Critical Marxism* (London: Phoenix Press, 1998) and Tony Cliff, *Trotskyism After Trotsky: The Origins of the International Socialists* (London: Bookmarks, 1999) and *A World to Win: Life of a Revolutionary* (London: Bookmarks, 2000).

[30] James Burnham, untitled review, *Russian Review*, volume 14, No. 2, April 1955, 151-152.

[31] Winston Churchill, *Great Companions* (1937), reprinted in Irving H. Smith, ed. *Trotsky: Great Lives Observed* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 87-88. This dovetails with the anti-democratic, elitist (indeed, racist) upper-class attitudes documented in Clive Ponting, *Churchill* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

[32] Isaac Deutscher, "Introduction," *The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology* (New York: Dell, 1964), 19. Also see: *Leon Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects*, with introductions by Michael Löwy (London: Socialist Resistance, 2007); Kunal Chattopadhyay, *The Marxism of Leon Trotsky* (Kolkata [Calcutta], India: Progressive Publishers, 2006), 93-195; Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice, eds., *100 Years of Permanent Revolution, Results and Prospects* (London: Pluto Press, 2006); and Paul Le Blanc, on ESSF website: [Uneven and Combined Development and the Sweep of History: Focus on Europe](#).