

### Controversy around the Trotsky Biography by Robert Service

Robert Service, Oxford historian and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and well-known for his biographies of Lenin and Stalin, released a biography of another prominent Bolshevik leader in 2009: the one of Lev Trotsky.<sup>1</sup> Service claimed to having released the first impartial biography of Trotsky, and in fact neither the book nor the author himself can be suspected of any sympathies towards the Bolshevik. At a book presentation in London, he was reported saying: “There’s life in the old boy Trotsky yet – but if the ice pick didn’t quite do its job killing him off, I hope I’ve managed it.”<sup>2</sup>

While the biography at first was positively received in the daily press (including enthusiastic commentaries by Tristram Hunt and Simon Sebag Montefiore),<sup>3</sup> the reaction from the political Left as well as from the academic press was mixed. The US Trotskyist David North, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, published a book-length defense of Trotsky, in which he accused Service not only of ideological distortions, but also of a large number of severe factual errors.<sup>4</sup> North’s critique was echoed by several reviewers in academic journals. Bertrand M. Patenaude of Stanford University, a Trotsky biographer himself without any political leanings towards the Left, checked Service’s biography against North’s criticism and concluded that the latter was “entirely justified”, while Service’s book “fails to meet the basic standards of historical scholarship”.<sup>5</sup> Alex Marshall of Glasgow University also examined the book and came to the conclusion that it is an “unbelievably lengthy, but simultaneously deeply shallow work” written by a “historian who too often comes across as basically tired and disinterested in his whole subject matter.”<sup>6</sup> In Germany, Reiner Tosstorff (University of Mainz) also has written a lengthy and thorough critique of Service’s monograph.<sup>7</sup> Not only did these historians criticise Service’s sensationalism and his questionable interpretations, they also pinpointed several factual errors concerning the history of the Russian Civil War, the revolutionary movement and so on. None of this, however, was noticed by Andreas Oberender (Humboldt University of Berlin), who, in a review, was fully convinced by the monograph and praised Service as the “ideal Trotsky biographer”. The fact criticised by other reviewers about Service mostly disregarding Trotsky’s ideological and theoretical heritage is seen by Oberender as an advantage: “Service is considerate enough not to confront the reader with the worst excrescences of Trotsky’s thought”, he claims, while referring to Trotsky’s “Terrorism and Communism” and “Literature and Revolution”.<sup>8</sup>

The academic criticism notwithstanding, Service’s book eventually was translated in several European languages. In Germany it was surprisingly Suhrkamp, a publishing house with a rich Left tradition, which announced to release a translation of the controversial Trotsky

<sup>1</sup> Robert Service: *Trotsky. A Biography*, London, Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Londoner’s Diary. In: *London Evening Standard*, 23 October 2009. URL: <http://londonersdiary.standard.co.uk/2009/10/bonding-with-my-mirror.html> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>3</sup> For an overview over English-language non-academic press reviews on the book, see <http://www.theomnivore.co.uk/book/4935-Trotsky/Default.aspx> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>4</sup> David North: *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, Oak Park, Mehring Books, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand M. Patenaude, in: *American Historical Review* 116 (2011), 3, pp. 900-902.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Marshall, in: *Critique* 38 (2010), 4, pp. 687-689.

<sup>7</sup> Reiner Tosstorff: *Trotzki-Biografien. Ein Streifzug*. In: *Mittelweg* 36. *Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung* 19 (2010), 1, pp. 33-43. An extended version of the review is available online at <http://www.rosalux.de/news/38247/zur-trotzki-biographie-von-robert-service.html> [Last accessed 3 September 2012]

<sup>8</sup> Andreas Oberender, in: *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 17 June 2010. URL: <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2010-2-208> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

biography. As a reaction to this, fourteen prominent German-language historians, some of them Suhrkamp authors themselves, sent an letter to the publishing house in July 2011. It was made public by the authors in November 2011, after Suhrkamp failed to respond to this initially private inquiry. The authors, including the doyen of German communist studies Hermann Weber, pinpointed many problematic aspects of Service's book, including his uncritical reproduction of antisemitic stereotypes, and appealed to Suhrkamp to reconsider the publication.<sup>9</sup> Two of the signees, Weber and Mario Kessler from the Center of Contemporary History (ZZF) and the University of Potsdam, also gave extensive interviews to the *World Socialist Website* (run by David North), highlighting their opposition to Service's book from a scholarly point of view.<sup>10</sup>

As a reaction to the academic protest, Suhrkamp has announced to put the book publishing plans on hold in order to evaluate the critical points raised in the open letter. Instead of the originally announced publication date in 2011, the German translation was launched in July 2012.<sup>11</sup> However, in most cases it left the errors untouched that have been pinpointed by earlier criticism.<sup>12</sup> The German editors of the WSWWS have compiled an English-language list of blunders that have been left untouched (or even made worse) in the German translation.<sup>13</sup> Unlike in the anglophone world, the monograph was met with criticism not only within the Left, but also in the mainstream daily and weekly press. Gerd Koenen, one of the most prolific German historians of communism and not a political adherent of Trotsky, reviewed the book for the German weekly *Die Zeit*, where he compared the book to "an endless PowerPoint presentation. In this biography, there is no psychological development, no dramaturgy [...]. There is nothing of the historic tension in which the [historic] agents operated. One does hardly dare to say it, but: [in this book] there is no history in the true sense of the word."<sup>14</sup> Reactions of other central German newspapers such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Rundschau* were also rather unfavourable to Service's book.<sup>15</sup> Some of it is to be seen how this controversy will further develop, but the lively discussion shows that the history of communism still can cause historical debates even outside the narrow circles of academia.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Historians to German Publisher Suhrkamp on Robert Service's Biography of Trotsky. In: *World Socialist Web Site*, 23 November 2011. URL: <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/nov2011/lett-n23.shtml>> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>10</sup> "Robert Service has written a diatribe, not a scientific polemic!" A Conversation with Professor Hermann Weber. In: *World Socialist Web Site*, 28 November 2011. URL: <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/nov2011/webe-n28.shtml>> [Last accessed 20 August 2012]; "Of course, Trotsky was an alternative to Stalin". An Interview with Professor Mario Kessler on the Trotsky Biography by Robert Service. In: *World Socialist Web Site*, 21 May 2012. URL: <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/may2012/kess-m21.shtml>> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>11</sup> Robert Service: *Trotsky. Eine Biographie*. Aus dem Englischen von F. Giese, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See: Wolfgang Weber: Germany. Suhrkamp Verlag publishes Robert Service's diatribe against Leon Trotsky. In: *World Socialist Web Site*, 2 August 2012. URL: <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/aug2012/suhr-a02.shtml>> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>13</sup> „Blunders, falsifications, fake references, distortions. The Trotsky-Biography of Robert Service in its German Suhrkamp edition compared to the English original". URL: <[http://trozki.gleichheit.de/sites/default/files/blunders\\_service.pdf](http://trozki.gleichheit.de/sites/default/files/blunders_service.pdf)> [Last accessed 2 September 2012]

<sup>14</sup> Gerd Koenen: Mit dem Eispickel. In: *Zeit Online*, 22 July 2012. URL: <<http://www.zeit.de/2012/29/L-P-Trotsky>> [Last accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>15</sup> For an overview, see: <<http://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/robert-service/trotsky.html>>. The controversy is also documented in parts at <<http://www.trozki.de>>. [Last accessed 20 August 2012]

<sup>16</sup> The Mehring publishing house will organise a discussion panel at the 49th German Historians Assembly (Deutscher Historikertag) in Mainz on 27 September 2012. David North and Mario Kessler will speak on the controversy at Johann-Gutenberg-University, Room N1.

**Russia: "Commission against Falsification" Dissolved**

The controversial "Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests", founded by the Russian president in 2009 and causing wide discussions about scholarly freedom (see *INCS* (2009), pp. 287-288), has been now silently dissolved in February 2012. In the three years of its existence, the commission has made no notable appearance in academia or the media public. After the dissolution, members of the commission are quoted stating that the commission has fulfilled its role. Some members of the Russian academia, however, call the commission a stillborn undertaking which has failed to prevent concrete cases where forged archival documents were published. For a detailed report with statements by participants and members of the Russian academia, see: Iuliia Kantor: Bez fal'sifikatsii. "Istoricheskaia" kommissiia pri prezidente raspushchena. In: *Moskovskie novosti*, 19 March 2012. URL: <[http://mn.ru/society\\_history/20120319/313741427.html](http://mn.ru/society_history/20120319/313741427.html)> [Last accessed 19 August 2012].