

Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification

A review of two Trotsky biographies by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher

By David North

Part 1: Seventy years since Stalin's year of terror

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Trotsky, by Geoffrey Swain. 237 pages, Longman, 2006.

Trotsky, by Ian D. Thatcher. 240 pages, Routledge, 2003.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the most terrible year in the history of the Soviet Union. Having staged in August 1936 a political show trial in Moscow that provided a pseudo-judicial cover for the murder of Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, Ivan Smirnov and other leaders of the October Revolution, Stalin launched in 1937 a campaign of terror whose goal was the destruction of all remnants of Marxist political thought and culture in the Soviet Union. The terror targeted for extermination virtually everyone who had played a significant role in the October Revolution of 1917, or who had at any point in their careers been identified with any form of Marxian and socialist opposition to the Stalinist regime, or were associated — either personally or through their comrades, friends and family — with a Marxian political, intellectual and cultural milieu.

Even after the passage of 70 years, the number of those murdered by the Stalinist regime in 1937-38 has not been conclusively established. According to a recent analysis by Professor Michael Ellman of the University of Amsterdam, the “best estimate that can currently be made of the number of repression deaths in 1937-38 is the range of 950,000-1.2 million, i.e. about a million. This is the estimate which should be used by historians, teachers and journalists concerned with twentieth century Russian — and world — history.”[1] Ellman notes that the discovery of new evidence may at some point require a revision of this figure.

There now exists substantial archival evidence that provides a detailed picture of how Stalin and his henchmen in the Politburo and NKVD organized and carried out their campaign of mass murder. The Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court played a central role in the process of judicially-sanctioned mass murder. A total of 54 defendants were sentenced at the three public show trials in Moscow. But there were tens of thousands of people who were tried behind closed doors by the Military Collegium and sentenced to death after “trials” that usually were completed within ten to fifteen minutes.[2] The victims were drawn from lists of individuals that had been prepared by the NKVD, along with a proposed sentence. These were submitted for review by Stalin and the Politburo. The names were those of “leading Party, Soviet, *Komsomol*, Trade Union, Red Army and

NKVD officials, as well as writers, artists and prominent representatives of economic institutions, who had been arrested by the same NKVD.”[3] Stalin and his Politburo reviewed these lists and, in almost all cases, approved the recommended sentences — mostly death by shooting. There are 383 lists in the Presidential Archive in Moscow, submitted to Stalin between 27 February 1937 and 29 September 1938, which contain the typed names of 44,500 people. The signatures of Stalin and his colleagues, along with their penciled-in comments, are on these lists.[4]

The Military Collegium handed down 14,732 sentences in 1937 and another 24,435 in 1938. Stalin was the principal director of the terror and was deeply involved in its daily operations. On just one day, 12 September 1938, Stalin approved 3,167 death sentences for action by the Military Collegium.[5] There exists a substantial amount of information on how the Military Collegium conducted its work. Its secret trials were usually conducted at Moscow's Lefortovo prison. The official mainly in charge of the process was the Collegium's President, Vasili Ul'rikh. On a busy day, the Collegium could handle 30 or more cases. It was often necessary to set up additional Collegium courts to deal with the crush of prisoners. The usual procedure was to bring prisoners before the Collegium. The charge was read to the accused, who was generally asked only to acknowledge the testimony that he had given during his earlier “investigation.” Whether the defendant answered in the affirmative or negative, the trial was then declared to be over. After hearing five such cases, the Collegium retired to consider its verdicts, which had already been decided and written down. The defendants were then recalled to hear their fate — almost always death. The sentences were generally carried out the same day.[6]

This was hard work for the Collegium members, and they required substantial nourishment to keep them going. They retired to the deliberation room for their meals, which, according to the account of a Lefortovo prison official, consisted of “various cold snacks, including different kinds of sausages, cheese, butter, black caviar, pastries, chocolate, fruits and fruit juice.” Ul'rikh washed the food down with brandy.[7]

The Collegium members did not only hand down verdicts. Frequently they attended and even carried out the executions that they had ordered. Ul'rikh occasionally returned home from his work with the blood of his victims on his greatcoat.

Moscow was not the only city in which the secret trials were held. Parallel processes were conducted in cities throughout the USSR. The terror did not subside until the Stalinist regime had murdered virtually all the representatives of the Marxist and socialist culture that had laid the intellectual foundations for the October Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union. Soviet society was traumatized by the massive killing. As the Russian Marxist historian Vadim Z. Rogovin wrote:

“A wasteland of scorched earth was formed around the murdered leaders of Bolshevism, insofar as their wives, children and closest comrades were eliminated after them. The fear evoked by the Stalinist terror left its mark on the consciousness and behavior of several generations of Soviet people; for many it eradicated the readiness, desire and ability to engage in honest ideological thought. At the same time, the executioners and informers from Stalin’s time continued to thrive; they had secured their own well-being and the prosperity of their children through active participation in frame-ups, expulsion, torture, and so forth.” [8]

Stalin’s crimes were justified on the basis of grotesque lies, which portrayed the Marxist opponents and victims of the bureaucratic-totalitarian regime — above all, Leon Trotsky — as saboteurs, terrorists and agents of various imperialist and fascist powers. But the lies that formed the basis of the show trial indictments of Trotsky and other Old Bolsheviks had been prepared over the previous 15 years, that is, dating back to the anti-Trotsky campaign initiated in 1922 by Stalin and his self-destructive allies, Kamenev and Zinoviev.

As Trotsky explained in the aftermath of the first two Moscow Trials — the proceeding of August 1936 was followed by the second show trial in January 1937 — the origins of the judicial frame-up were to be found in the falsification of the historical record that had been required by the political struggle against “Trotskyism” — that is, against the political opposition to the bureaucratic regime headed by Stalin. “It remains an incontestable historical fact,” Trotsky wrote in March 1937, “that the preparation of the bloody judicial frame-ups had its inception in the ‘minor’ historical distortions and ‘innocent’ falsification of citations.” [9]

No one who has studied the origins of the Stalinist terror and grappled seriously with its consequences is inclined to underestimate the politically reactionary and socially destructive implications of historical falsification. We know from the example of the Soviet Union that the political process that first manifested itself as the falsification of the history of the Russian revolution eventually metastasized into the mass extermination of Russian revolutionaries. Before Stalin entered into history as one of its worst murderers, he had already burnished his reputation as its greatest liar.

Trotsky not only exposed the lies of Stalin; he also explained the objective roots and function of the regime’s vast system of political and social duplicity:

“Thousands of writers, historians and economists in the USSR write by command what they do not believe. Professors in universities and school teachers are compelled to change written textbooks in a hurry in order to accommodate themselves to the successive stage of the official lie. The spirit of the Inquisition thoroughly impregnating the atmosphere of the country feeds ... from profound social sources. To justify their privileges the ruling

caste perverts the theory which has as its aim the elimination of all privileges. The lie serves, therefore, as the fundamental ideological cement of the bureaucracy. The more irreconcilable becomes the contradiction between the bureaucracy and the people, all the ruder becomes the lie, all the more brazenly is it converted into criminal falsification and judicial frame-up. Whoever has not understood this inner dialectic of the Stalinist régime will likewise fail to understand the Moscow trials.” [10]

It may appear, in retrospect, astonishing that so many people who considered themselves on the left were prepared to justify, and even actually believe, the accusations hurled by Vyshinsky, the Stalinist prosecutor, against the Old Bolshevik defendants at the Moscow Trials. A substantial section of liberal and leftist public opinion accepted the legitimacy of the Moscow Trials and, in this way, lent its support to the terror that was raging in the USSR. The Stalinist regime — whatever its crimes within the USSR — was seen, at least until the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler in August 1939, as a political ally against Nazi Germany. Pragmatic considerations, rooted in the social outlook of the petty-bourgeois “friends of the USSR,” underlay the pro-Stalin apologetics of large sections of “left” public opinion. Even the refutation of key elements of the indictments was ignored by Stalin’s apologists. [11] The work of the Dewey Commission, which took its name from the American liberal philosopher who served as chairman of the 1937 Inquiry into the Soviet charges against Leon Trotsky, stood in noble opposition to the cynical, dishonest and reactionary attitudes that prevailed in the circles of left public opinion, especially in Britain, France and the United States.

The exposure of Stalinism

Nearly two decades were to pass before the edifice of Stalinist lies erected at the Moscow trials began to crumble. The decisive event in this process was the “secret” speech given by Khrushchev in February 1956, before the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which the criminal character of Stalin’s terror was acknowledged for the first time. But this exposure was preceded by significant developments in the field of historical research that contributed immeasurably to a factually accurate and more profound understanding of the history of the Soviet Union and to the role of Leon Trotsky.

The first major event in the historical rehabilitation of Trotsky was the publication of E. H. Carr’s monumental history of Soviet Russia, and especially its fourth volume, entitled *The Interregnum*. This volume, making extensive use of official Soviet documents available in the West, provided a detailed account of the political struggles that erupted inside the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party in 1923-24. Carr was not politically sympathetic to Trotsky. But he brilliantly summarized and analyzed the complex issues of program, policy and principle with which Trotsky grappled in a difficult and critical period of Soviet history. Carr’s account made clear that Trotsky became the target of an unprincipled attack that was, in its initial stages, motivated by his rivals’ subjective considerations of personal power. While Carr found much to criticize in Trotsky’s response to the provocations of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, the historian left no doubt that he viewed Trotsky as, alongside of Lenin, the towering figure of the Bolshevik Revolution. In “many spheres” of revolutionary

political activity, Carr maintained in a later volume, Trotsky “outshone” even Lenin. As for Stalin, Carr wrote that Trotsky “eclipsed” him “in almost all.” But the decline in revolutionary fervor inside the USSR, ever more noticeable after 1922, affected Trotsky’s political fortunes. “Trotsky was a hero of the revolution,” wrote Carr. “He fell when the heroic age was over.”[12]

The second major event in the study of Soviet history was the publication of Isaac Deutscher’s magisterial biographical trilogy: *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast*. April 2007 marked the centenary of Deutscher’s birth; and it is appropriate to pay tribute to his achievement as a historian and biographer. Even though I speak as one who disagrees profoundly with many of Deutscher’s political judgments — particularly as they relate to Trotsky’s decision to found the Fourth International (which Deutscher opposed) — it is difficult to overestimate the impact of Deutscher’s *Prophet*. He was not being immodest when he compared his own work to that of Thomas Carlyle who, as the biographer of another revolutionary, Oliver Cromwell, “had to drag out the Lord Protector from under a mountain of dead dogs, a huge load of calumny and oblivion.”[13] Deutscher proudly cited a British critic, who wrote that the first volume of the trilogy, *The Prophet Armed*, “undoes three decades of Stalinist denigration.”[14]

In addition to the work of Carr and Deutscher, a new generation of historians made, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, significant contributions to our understanding of the Russian revolution, the origins and development of the Soviet Union, and its leading personalities. Leopold Haimson, Samuel Baron, Robert Daniels, Alexander Rabinowitch, Robert Tucker, Moshe Lewin, Marcel Liebman, Richard Day and Baruch Knei-Paz come immediately to mind. To recognize the value of their work and to appreciate their scholarship does not, and need not, imply agreement with their judgments and conclusions. The enduring significance of their collective efforts, and those of others whom I have not named, is that they contributed to the refutation of the lies, distortions and half-truths in which the history of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union had been enshrouded for so many decades. And not only falsifications of the Soviet government, but also the stultifying anti-Marxist propaganda of the US government in the era of the Cold War.

To have some sense of the impact of these historians’ work on the intellectual climate of their times, permit me to cite several passages from the text of a study of Trotsky’s life that was published in 1973 as part of the well-known “Great Lives Observed” series. This series — published by Prentice-Hall, the long-established distributor of academic textbooks — was a mainstay of university history courses in the 1960s and 1970s. Thousands of students taking courses in Russian or modern European history would have been introduced to the figure of Leon Trotsky through this volume, and this is what they would have read in its very first paragraph:

“With the passage of time historical figures either shrink or grow in stature. In the case of Leon Trotsky time, after a brief eclipse, has increased his image so that he appears today, for good or evil, as one of the giants of the first half of the twentieth century. The renewed interest in Trotsky’s life is reflected by the numerous studies which are beginning to appear, and by the sudden availability of almost all his writings. For many of the New

Left generation he has reclaimed both the prestige and the mantle of *the* revolutionary leader.”[15]

The introduction provided, on the basis of the findings of contemporary scholars, a concise assessment of Trotsky’s revolutionary career. “The argument supporting Trotsky’s claim to importance,” it stated, “rests on his contribution to political theory, his literary legacy, and above all his role as a man of action.” As a theorist, Trotsky’s analysis of Russian social forces and his elaboration of the theory of permanent revolution “suggests that as a Marxist thinker he could, on the power of his creativity, go beyond the formulations of Marx and Engels.” Trotsky, therefore, deserved to be placed within the “brilliant coterie of Marxist theorists such as Plekhanov, Kautsky, Luxemburg, and, for that matter, Lenin himself.” As a literary figure, Trotsky stood above even these great Marxists. “Magnificent word play, scathing sarcasm, and brilliant character sketches are the hallmarks of his writing. To read Trotsky is to observe the literary artist at work.” And then there were Trotsky’s achievements as a man of action. The introduction noted “Trotsky’s role in Russian revolutionary history is second only to Lenin’s,” and his “decisive leadership in the Military Revolutionary Committee that paved the way for the October insurrection...” It also called attention to Trotsky’s “determined efforts to build the Red Army in the face of enormous obstacles...”[16]

None of these achievements was known to the mass of Soviet citizens. There existed no honest account of Trotsky’s life and work within the USSR because “Soviet historians have long since abandoned the responsibility of historical writing and have busied themselves with the grotesque efforts to create a new demonology.” Within the Soviet Union, Trotsky remained “an abstraction of evil — a militating force against the future of the Soviet people.”[17] But outside the USSR, the situation was different:

“Soviet demonology, absurd from its inception, has been largely vanquished, at least in the Western world. Part Three of this book contains selections of relatively recent writers on the problem of Trotsky. The best examples of this more objective scholarship are Edward Hallett Carr’s multi-volume study, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, and Isaac Deutscher’s painstaking three-volume study of Trotsky. The historical debate may be never ending, but in the light of these more recent studies Trotsky’s role in the Russian experience can be seen in a new and positive perspective. In the West, the miasmatic cloud has disappeared; the demonic hierarchy has been exorcized. We can now come to grips with the material forces and issues which motivated and inspired the action and deeds of Leon Trotsky.”[18]

I have quoted extensively from this text because it provides a clear summary of what the general student studying history at the college level would have been told about Leon Trotsky some 35 years ago.[19] When one turns to the texts that are now being presented to students, it becomes immediately apparent that we are living in a very different — and far less healthy — intellectual environment. But before I may do so, it is necessary to examine, if only briefly, the treatment of Trotsky in Soviet historical literature in the aftermath of the 20th Congress and Khrushchev’s “secret speech.”

The official exposure of Stalin's crimes in 1956 placed the Kremlin bureaucracy and its many apologists on the defensive. The party-line version of history had been for nearly two decades Stalin's own *Short Course of the History of the CPSU*. From the moment Khrushchev ascended the podium of the Twentieth Party Congress, this compendium of incredible lies, soaked in human blood, lost all credibility. But with what could it be replaced? To this question the Stalinist bureaucracy never found a viable answer.

Every important question relating to the history of the Russian revolutionary movement — the events of 1917, the Civil War, the early years of the Soviet state, the inner-party conflicts of the 1920s, the growth of the Soviet bureaucracy, the relation of the Soviet Union to international revolutionary movements and struggles, industrialization, collectivization, Soviet cultural policy, and the Stalinist terror — posed unavoidably the issue of Lev Davidovitch Trotsky. Every criticism of Stalin raised the question, "Was Trotsky right?" The historical, political, theoretical and moral issues that flowed from the exposure of Stalin's crimes and the catastrophic impact of his policies and personality on every aspect of Soviet society could not be dealt with by simply removing Stalin from his glass-encased mausoleum alongside Lenin and reburying his corpse under the wall of the Kremlin.

Isaac Deutscher had nourished the hope — a hope that reflected the limitations of his political outlook — that the Stalinist bureaucracy would finally, at long last, find some way to come to terms with history and make its peace with Leon Trotsky. It proved a vain hope. To deal honestly with Trotsky would have required, at some point, that his writings be made available. But notwithstanding the passage of decades, Trotsky's exposure and

denunciations of the Stalinist regime remained as explosive in their revolutionary potential as they had been during his own lifetime.

After Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and unveiled his policy of *glasnost*, there was a great deal of public discussion about the official rehabilitation of Trotsky. As the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution approached, it was widely anticipated that Gorbachev would take this opportunity to acknowledge Trotsky's role in the leadership of the October Revolution and his struggle against Stalin. But the very opposite occurred. On November 2, 1987, speaking in a televised address to a national audience, Gorbachev again denounced Trotsky in traditional Stalinist terms. Trotsky, he said, was "an excessively self-assured politician who always vacillated and cheated." [20]

By the time Gorbachev delivered his shameful speech, interest in Trotsky and the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism was developing rapidly in the Soviet Union. Soviet journals that published, for the first time since the 1920s, documents relating to Trotsky, such as *Argumenti i Fakti*, enjoyed a massive increase in their circulation. Trotskyists from Europe, Australia and the United States traveled to the Soviet Union and delivered lectures that were widely attended. Gorbachev's speech was clearly an attempt to respond to this changed situation, but it proved utterly unsuccessful. The old Stalinist lies — denying Trotsky's role in the October Revolution, portraying him as an enemy of the Soviet Union — had lost all credibility.

Within little more than four years after Gorbachev's speech, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Trotsky's warning that the Stalinist bureaucracy, unless overthrown by the working class, would ultimately destroy the Soviet Union and clear the way for the restoration of capitalism was vindicated.

Part 2: The study of Trotsky after the fall of the USSR

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The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 raised with new urgency the issue of the historical role of Leon Trotsky. After all, the Soviet implosion demanded an explanation. Amidst the bourgeois triumphalism that attended the dissolution of the USSR — which, by the way, not a single major bourgeois political leader had foreseen — the answer seemed obvious. The Soviet collapse of December 1991 flowed organically from the October 1917 Revolution. This theory, based on the assumption that a non-capitalist form of human society was simply impossible, found its way into several books published in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, of which the late Professor Martin Malia's *The Soviet Tragedy* was the most significant example.

However, books of this sort evaded the problem of historical alternatives; that is, were the policies pursued by Stalin and his successors the only options available to the USSR? Had the Soviet Union pursued different policies at various points in its 74-year history, might that have produced a significantly different historical outcome? To put the matter as succinctly as possible: Was there an alternative to Stalinism? I am not posing this as an abstract hypothetical counterfactual. Did there exist a socialist opposition

to Stalinism? Did this opposition propose serious and substantial alternatives in terms of policy and program?

The answers to such crucial questions demand a serious reengagement with the ideas of Leon Trotsky and the oppositional movement that he led within the USSR and internationally. This, however, has not happened. Rather than building upon the achievements of earlier generations of scholars and drawing upon the vast new archival resources that have become available over the past 15 years, the dominant tendency in the historiography of the Soviet Union has been in a very different direction.

The years since the fall of the USSR have seen the emergence of what can best be described as The Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification. The principal objective of this school is to discredit Leon Trotsky as a significant historical figure, to deny that he represented an alternative to Stalinism, or that his political legacy contains anything relevant in the present and valuable for the future. Every historian is entitled to his or her viewpoint. But these viewpoints must be grounded in a serious, honest and principled attitude toward the assembling of facts and the presentation of historical evidence. It is this essential quality,

however, that is deplorably absent in two new biographies of Leon Trotsky, one by Professor Geoffrey Swain of the University of Glasgow and the other by Professor Ian D. Thatcher of Brunel University in West London. These works have been brought out by large and influential publishing houses. Swain's biography has been published by Longman; Thatcher's by Routledge. Their treatment of the life of Leon Trotsky is without the slightest scholarly merit. Both works make limited use of Trotsky's own writings, offering few substantial citations and even ignoring major books, essays and political statements.

Despite their publishers' claims that the biographies are based on significant original research, there is no indication that either Swain or Thatcher made use of the major archival collections of Trotsky's papers held at Harvard and Stanford Universities. Well-established facts relating to Trotsky's life are, without credible evidentiary foundation, "called into question" or dismissed as "myths," to use the authors' favorite phrases. While belittling and even mocking Trotsky, Swain and Thatcher repeatedly attempt to lend credibility and legitimacy to Stalin, frequently defending the latter against Trotsky's criticism and finding grounds to justify the attacks on Trotsky and the Left Opposition. In many cases, their own criticisms of Trotsky are recycled versions of old Stalinist falsifications.

The formats of the Swain and Thatcher biographies are similar in design and page length, and are clearly directed toward a student audience. The authors know, of course, that the books will be the first acquaintance with Trotsky for most of their readers; and they have crafted these two books in a manner calculated to disabuse readers of any further interest in their subject. As Professor Swain proclaims with evident satisfaction in the first paragraph of his volume, "Readers of this biography will not find their way to Trotskyism." [21] Nor, he might have added, will they derive any understanding of Trotsky's ideas, the principles for which he fought, and his place in the history of the twentieth century.

The "myth" of Trotsky

Both biographies proclaim that they challenge, undermine and even disprove "myths" about Trotsky's life and work. In a brief foreword to the Thatcher biography, the publisher asserts that "Key myths about Trotsky's heroic work as a revolutionary, especially in Russia's first revolution in 1905 and the Russian Civil War, are thrown into question." [22] Swain asserts that in his book "a rather different picture of Trotsky emerges to that traditionally drawn, more of the man and less of the myth." [23] What "myths" are they setting out to dispel? Significantly, both authors denounce the work of Isaac Deutscher, whom they hold responsible for creating the heroic historical persona that prevails to this day. Thatcher asserts condescendingly that Deutscher's trilogy reads like "a boy's own adventure story," a characteristic which "gives an indication of the attractions, as well as the weaknesses, of Deutscher's tomes." Thatcher implies that Deutscher's biography is a dubious exercise in hero-worship, which "abounds with instances in which Trotsky saw further and deeper than those around him." With evident sarcasm, Thatcher suggests that Deutscher credited Trotsky with an improbably long list of political, practical and intellectual achievements. He accuses

Deutscher of indulging in improper "invention" and of "diversions into fiction." These flaws, writes Thatcher, "do detract from the work's status as a history, and as historians we must approach Deutscher both critically and with caution." [24]

In fact, all historical works — even masterpieces of the genre — must be read critically. But Thatcher denigrates Deutscher's work not for its weaknesses, but for its greatest strength — its masterly restoration of Trotsky's revolutionary persona. As for the specific example used by Thatcher to support his claim of invention and diversions into fiction, he provides what turns out to be an incomplete citation from *The Prophet Armed*. When read in its entirety, Deutscher's use of analogy to recreate the mood that prevailed within the Bolshevik leadership at a time of intense crisis — the conflict over the Brest Litovsk treaty in February 1918 — may be appreciated as an example of the author's extraordinary literary skills and psychological insight. [25]

The significance of the two authors' antipathy toward Deutscher's trilogy emerges quite clearly in Swain's biography. He writes accusingly that "Deutscher went along with, and indeed helped to foster the Trotsky myth, the idea that he was 'the best Bolshevik': together Lenin and Trotsky carried out the October Revolution and, with Lenin's support, Trotsky consistently challenged Stalin from the end of 1922 onwards to save the revolution from its bureaucratic degeneration; in this version of events Trotsky was Lenin's heir." [26]

A "myth," as defined by Webster, is "an unfounded or false notion." But all the items listed by Swain as elements of the Deutscher-propagated "Trotsky myth" are grounded in facts supported by documentary evidence that has been cited by numerous historians over the past half-century. While Swain implies that Deutscher was involved in a conspiracy against historical truth (he "went along with, and indeed helped foster the Trotsky myth"), his real aim is to discredit historical work — that of Deutscher and many others — that shattered decades of Stalinist falsification. Well-established historical facts relating to Trotsky's life are subjected to the literary equivalent of a drumhead court-martial and declared to be mere "myths." No evidence of a factual character that is capable of withstanding serious scrutiny is produced to support the summary verdict pronounced by Swain and Thatcher. The aim of their exercise in pseudo-biography is to restore the historical position of Trotsky to where it stood before the works of Deutscher and, for that matter, E.H. Carr were published — that is, to the darkest period of the Stalin School of Falsification.

The appeal to authority

Let us now examine the method the two professors employ to discredit well-established historical facts. One of Swain's and Thatcher's favorite techniques is to make an outrageous and provocative statement about Trotsky, which flies in the face of what is known to be factually true, and then support it by citing the work of another author. Their readers are not provided with new facts that support Swain's and Thatcher's assertion. Rather, they are simply told that the statement is based on the work of some other historian.

Thus, Swain announces that he has "drawn heavily on the work of other scholars. Ian Thatcher has rediscovered the pre-1917

Trotsky as well as showing clearly how unreliable Trotsky's own writings can be. James White has completely reassessed the Lenin and Trotsky relationship in 1917, showing that the two men's visions of insurrection were entirely different. Eric van Ree demolished the notion that Trotsky was Lenin's heir. Richard Day, writing more than 30 years ago, argued convincingly that Trotsky, far from being an internationalist, believed firmly in the possibility of building socialism in one country. More controversially, Nikolai Valentinov suggested nearly 50 years ago that in 1925, far from opposing Stalin, Trotsky was in alliance with him; although Valentinov's suggestion of a pact sealed at a secret meeting has not stood the test of time, other evidence confirms a period of testy collaboration." [27]

Presented here is what is known in logic as an appeal to authority. However, such an appeal is valid only to the extent of the authority's credibility. In this particular instance, the argument is not settled simply by citing Thatcher, White, van Ree, Day and Valentinov. We must know more about them, their work, and the evidence upon which they based their conclusions. And we must also know whether they actually held the position being attributed to them. As we shall see, the last question is particularly important, for when dealing with the work of Professors Swain and Thatcher, absolutely nothing can be taken for granted.

In regard to Swain's reference to Professor James White of the University of Glasgow, the latter hardly qualifies — for anyone familiar with his work — as a historian whose judgments on the subject of Trotsky can be accepted as authoritative, or, for that matter, even credible. [28]

As for van Ree, who is also one of Thatcher's favorite sources, his work as a historian must certainly be approached with caution, if not a face mask. As an ex-Maoist who is now a passionate anti-Communist, he recently offered, in a book entitled *World Revolution: The Communist Movement from Marx to Kim il-Jong*, the following assessment of Lenin and Trotsky:

"Yet all things considered they too were rogues, leaders of gangs of political thugs. They enjoyed prosecuting civil war. They proclaimed the Red Terror because they imagined themselves to be actors in a fantastic historical drama. They had the privilege of being allowed to repeat the performance at which Maximilien de Robespierre failed, and they were determined that this time round no one would be left alive who could possibly turn their fortunes against them. Lenin and Trotsky took pride in the fact that they did not care a jot about democracy or human rights. They enjoyed the exercise of their own brutality." [29]

Aside from their overheated character, none of these statements could be cited as an example of sober historical judgment. Professor van Ree is evidently a very angry man with quite a few political chips on his shoulder. He is not qualified to render decisive judgment on the nature of the Lenin-Trotsky relationship. However, I should note that according to the account given by van Ree in the above cited work, Lenin and Trotsky were partners in crime who shared the same criminal world view. Holding that view, how could van Ree "demolish the notion that Trotsky was Lenin's heir"? Moreover, in a discussion of the relationship between Lenin and Trotsky, the word "heir" has a political rather than legal connotation. Whether or not Trotsky should be considered Lenin's "heir" is precisely the sort of question over which historians will probably argue for decades

to come. It is not likely to be settled in one essay, even one written by a scholar of substantially greater skill, knowledge, insight and judgment than Mr. van Ree. For Swain to assert that van Ree "demolished the notion that Trotsky was Lenin's heir" proves only that Swain has not thought through with sufficient care the complex historical, political, social and theoretical issues that arise in any serious study of the Lenin-Trotsky relationship.

Let us now consider Swain's invocation of Professor Richard Day to substantiate his own provocative thesis that Trotsky, "far from being an internationalist, firmly believed in the possibility of building socialism in one country." I must confess that I rubbed my eyes in amazement upon seeing Professor Day cited as an authority for such an outlandish statement. In contrast to the gentlemen to whom I have already referred, Professor Day is an outstanding and respected historian who for many decades has carried out serious work on the struggles within the Soviet government during the 1920s over economic policy. In particular, he has subjected the work of E. A. Preobrazhensky to serious analysis and shed light on significant differences that existed within the Left Opposition on important problems of economic theory and policy.

Swain's reference to Day contains both distortion and falsification. In the work cited by Swain, *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*, Day employs certain formulations suggesting that Trotsky did not reject the possibility of socialism in one country, but opposed the conception that this could be achieved, as Stalin proposed, on an autarchic basis. Moreover, Day's discussion of Trotsky's position on "socialism in one country" must be read in the context of the book's presentation of the debate over Soviet economic policy. Swain, however, seizes on several ambiguous phrases employed by Day in the opening pages of his book, and proceeds to misrepresent the central analytical line of *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. Whatever the limitations of Day's argument, there is absolutely nothing in his book that supports Swain's claim that Trotsky was not an internationalist. [30] This is a blatant falsification of the argument presented in *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. [31]

I will not waste my time refuting the reference to Valentinov, an old Menshevik and bitter opponent of Trotsky. Swain does not even bother to provide us with an actual quote from Valentinov. No evidence whatever is offered to substantiate this claim. As for Valentinov's tale of "a pact sealed at a secret meeting," Swain himself acknowledges that it "has not stood the test of time." In other words, it was a fabrication. But why, then, does Swain even bring it up?

Rhetorical internationalism

Swain's use of sources whom he acknowledges to be unreliable is characteristic of his cynical attitude to the historical record. He has no compunction about making statements that contradict everything that is known and documented about Trotsky life. He tells us that "Trotsky believed in world revolution, but no more and no less than every other Bolshevik, and like all other Bolsheviks this belief was largely rhetorical." [32] In other words, there was, according to Swain, no difference in the place that the perspective of world revolution played in the lifework of Leon

Trotsky from that which it played in the thoughts and activities of Molotov, Voroshilov, and Stalin! How does one even begin to answer an absurdity of this magnitude?

Readers are to believe that the political conceptions that governed Trotsky's political activity over a period of nearly 40 years, and which found expression in countless speeches and thousands of pages of written documents, represented nothing more than external posturing, devoid of serious intellectual, emotional and moral substance. Everything was merely a political subterfuge, a cover for what were essentially nationalist preoccupations related to the factional power struggle that Trotsky was conducting in the Soviet Union. As Swain writes:

"His critique of the failed German Revolution in 1923 was simply camouflage for an attack on his then domestic opponents Zinoviev and Kamenev. It was the same with his writings on the British General Strike, although here his opponents were Bukharin and Stalin. As for his enthusiasm for China in 1927, that too was essentially domestic in focus... It was only in emigration, in 1933, when he had buried the concept of Thermidor, that Trotsky explored the idea of how the revival of the working class movement in Europe might have a beneficial impact on the Soviet Union and halt the degeneration of the workers' state. Then internationalism became central to his cause." [33]

Swain evidently assumes that his student readership will be totally ignorant of the events and issues under discussion. He produces no evidence of a factual character to back his conclusion. Nor does he attempt to support his argument on the basis of an analysis of Trotsky's writings. This glaring omission reflects his general disinterest in Trotsky as a writer. Swain makes a point of telling his readers that his biography makes no reference to the "great" work by Professor Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*. Swain acknowledges that this may come as a surprise to Trotsky scholars. But he defends his omission by arguing that Knei-Paz attributed greater importance to Trotsky's writings than they merit: "Knei-Paz collects together Trotsky's writings under certain themes, bringing together earlier and later essays into a coherent exposition; this exposition makes Trotsky a far greater thinker than he was in reality. Trotsky wrote an enormous amount and as a journalist, he was happy to write on subjects about which he knew very little." [34]

When a historian delivers such an unqualified judgment, it is to be expected that he will proceed to substantiate his claim. Swain should have supported it by pointing to specific essays or articles in which Trotsky showed himself to be ignorant of the subject matter with which he was dealing. Swain fails to present a single citation to support his argument. Instead, he continues in the same vein: "Trotsky could write beautifully, but he was no philosopher." [35] In fact, Trotsky never claimed to be one. But this did not prevent him from grasping more profoundly and precisely the social, political and economic realities of the age in which he lived than the philosophers of his generation. Who better understood the nature of twentieth century imperialism and fascism: Martin Heidegger, who ostentatiously proclaimed his allegiance to Hitler, or Trotsky? Who had deeper and clearer insights into the bankruptcy of Fabian reformism in Britain: Bertrand Russell or Trotsky? [36]

A more honest and capable historian might have included in an analysis of Trotsky's stature as a writer the following extract

from the diaries of the great German literary critic, Walter Benjamin: "June 3, 1931 ... The previous evening, a discussion with Brecht, Brentano, and Hesse in the Café du Centre. The conversation turned to Trotsky; Brecht maintained there were good reasons for thinking that Trotsky was the greatest living European writer." [37] One can only imagine what Swain might have contributed to this conversation had he been present at the Café du Centre. "Well perhaps, Bertolt. But Trotsky is no philosopher!"

As one works through the entire biography, one cannot help but be amazed by the indifference that Swain displays toward Trotsky's writings. Many of his most important works are barely mentioned, or even totally ignored. Though he acknowledges Trotsky's decisive role in the victory of the Red Army in the Civil War, Swain ignores his important writings on military theory. This is a significant omission, because many of the political and theoretical differences that arose between Trotsky and the Stalinist faction in later years were anticipated in the earlier conflicts over military policy. [38] There is no reference to Trotsky's extraordinary manifestos and speeches prepared for the first four Congresses of the Communist International (1919-1922). He makes no mention of Trotsky's far-sighted analysis of the emergence of American imperialism to a position of world domination and its evolving relationship with a declining and dependent Europe. This does not prevent Swain from proclaiming pompously that Trotsky "had absolutely no understanding of European politics." [39] One might just as well write that Einstein had no understanding of physics! Such ludicrous statements are written for only one purpose: to fill the minds of students who are unfamiliar with Trotsky's life and the historical period in which he lived with intellectually disorienting absurdities.

Swain's effort to convert Trotsky into an enthusiastic partisan of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country" amounts to a grotesque distortion and outright falsification of his actual views. Swain attributes to Lenin the authorship of this conception, noting that Stalin's lecture in which the new program was introduced invoked a quotation from an article Lenin had written in 1915. He fails to explain that Stalin ripped this quote out of context, and conveniently ignored the innumerable statements by Lenin emphatically linking the fate of socialism in Russia to the world revolution. More seriously, whether from ignorance, sheer incomprehension or design, Swain falsifies the views of Leon Trotsky. Referring to the 1925 series of articles by Trotsky published under the title, *Towards Socialism or Capitalism?*, Swain asserts that its logic "was clear. Socialism in one country could work if the correct economic policy was followed and state industrial investment gradually accelerated." [40]

If one identifies the possibility of initiating socialist construction within the USSR (which Trotsky advocated and encouraged) with the long-term viability of a Soviet form of nationalism (which Trotsky emphatically rejected), the theoretical content and political implications of the debate over economic policy are rendered incomprehensible. Even in *Towards Socialism or Capitalism?*, written in 1925 when he was still working through the implications of the nationalist shift in the theoretical basis of Soviet economic policy, Trotsky explicitly warned that the long-term survival of world capitalism meant that "socialism in a backward country would be confronted with great dangers." [41]

In September 1926 he declared that “The Opposition is profoundly convinced in the victory of socialism in our country not because our country can be torn free of the world economy but because the victory of the proletarian revolution is guaranteed the world over.”[42] In other words, socialism could be built in Russia if the working class conquered power in revolutionary struggles beyond its borders. Trotsky’s speech to the Fifteenth Conference on November 1, 1926 was a comprehensive attack on the perspective of national socialism.[43] Swain, of course, ignores this and other crucial texts that must be examined in order to deal correctly with the issue of “socialism in one country.”

Swain on 1923

Swain’s treatment of the crucial opening round of Trotsky’s struggle against the degeneration of the Soviet Communist Party is little more than a defense of the emerging Stalinist faction against Trotsky’s criticisms. Especially significant is Swain’s condemnation of a letter and series of articles written by Trotsky in early December 1923 under the title, *The New Course*. Swain writes:

“In the programmatic essay *The New Course*, written on 8 December and published after some haggling in *Pravda* on 11 December 1923, Trotsky denounced the increasingly bureaucratic leadership of the Party, asserting that the old, established leadership was in conflict with a younger generation. In one of those exaggerated parallels he loved, he compared the situation among the Bolshevik leaders with the time in the history of the German Social Democratic Party when the once radical allies of Marx and Engels slipped almost imperceptibly into a new role as the fathers of reformism. It was a nice image, but Kamenev, Stalin and Zinoviev were hardly going to relish the implication that only Trotsky was the true revolutionary and that they were mere reformists.

“In writing *The New Course*, Trotsky not only insulted his Politburo colleagues but, in Bolshevik terms, he gave them the moral high ground. He had reached an agreement and then broken it. He had done the same with Lenin at the height of the Brest Litovsk crisis. During the Trade Union Debate he had joined the Zinoviev Commission only to declare he would take no part in its work. The resolution against factionalism adopted at the Tenth Party Congress had been aimed specifically at preventing this sort of behavior. Whether or not Trotsky’s behavior had verged on factionalism in autumn 1923 could be open to interpretation, but *The New Course* was factionalist beyond doubt. He had signed up to a compromise, and then broken with it, challenging the revolutionary credentials of his Politburo comrades in the process.”[44]

What Swain offers here is not an objective account of the political origins, issues and events related to the conflict that erupted inside the Soviet Communist Party, but rather his own highly partisan defense of those who were the objects of Trotsky’s criticisms. Swain’s angry references to Trotsky’s behavior during the Brest Litovsk crisis in 1918 and the trade union conflict in 1920 read as if they were copied from the texts of Stalin’s own speeches. Swain tells us that Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin “were hardly going to relish” Trotsky’s criticisms, as if that somehow invalidates what Trotsky wrote in *The New Course*.

It is peculiar, to say the least, for a historian writing in 2006 to upbraid Trotsky for having engaged in “factionalist” behavior in launching what was to become one of the epochal political conflicts of the twentieth century. Swain, enjoying the benefit of hindsight, knows how all of this was to eventually turn out. The suppression of inner-party democracy, against which Trotsky raised his protest, was ultimately to grow into a murderous totalitarian dictatorship that carried out mass murder. And while Trotsky’s criticisms may have bruised the egos of Kamenev and Zinoviev, the two Old Bolsheviks suffered a far more terrible fate at the hands of Stalin 13 years later. Moreover, for Swain to chastise Trotsky’s warning of the danger of political degeneration of the older generation of Bolshevik leaders as “exaggerated” is nothing less than incredible. As history was to demonstrate all too tragically, Trotsky’s invocation of the example of the German Social Democratic leaders was, if anything, an underestimation of the dimensions of the tragedy that awaited the Bolshevik Party.

As for the specific charge that the writing of *The New Course* was inappropriate and factional behavior, it is not based on an honest reading of the historical record. Swain conveniently fails to note that the Politburo was dominated by a secret faction formed by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, which was grounded not on programmatic agreement, but rather on a shared determination to undermine Trotsky’s political influence. Thus, Trotsky was working inside a Politburo whose deliberations were tainted by ex parte agreements worked out behind the scenes by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev. Moreover, as E. H. Carr explained quite cogently in 1954, Trotsky’s letter of December 8 — part of the set of documents known as *The New Course* — was of an entirely principled character.

“The letter took the form of a commentary on the resolution of 5 December: it was an exposition of what Trotsky assumed the resolution to mean and a rebuttal of any other potential interpretations. It was not, as was afterwards pretended, a deliberate attack on the agreed text or on other members of the Politburo and of the central committee. The views were those which Trotsky, as he naively believed, had persuaded or compelled his colleagues to share. All that the letter did was, in Trotsky’s intention, to dot the i’s and cross the t’s of the resolution and to register his victory.”[45]

Carr also explains that the triumvirate and Trotsky had approached the drafting of the December 5, 1923 resolution on party reform with very different aims and criteria. For Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev, the actual content of the resolution was of secondary or even tertiary significance. Their interest in arriving at an agreement with Trotsky was based on purely tactical considerations, related to the struggle for power. With opposition spreading to the increasingly bureaucratic and high-handed methods of the leadership, the triumvirs were seeking to prevent, or at least delay, Trotsky’s open break with the central committee leadership. For Trotsky, in contrast, the resolution raised matters of high principle. Carr noted the difference between Trotsky and his opponents. “Trotsky, accustomed to see differences within the party fought out and settled through the drafting of party resolutions, attached to a victory on paper a practical value which, in the new conditions of party leadership, it no longer possessed.”[46]

Carr’s assessment is endorsed by historian Robert V. Daniels

in his influential *The Conscience of the Revolution*. Explaining the sequence of events that led to the writing of *The New Course*, Daniels writes: “Trotsky, aware of the hostility toward him that was barely concealed behind the resolution, undertook to stress the reform implications in an open letter to a party meeting on December 8. The New Course letter was an enthusiastic endorsement and explanation of the resolution of December 5, with emphasis on the role of the party rank-and-file in its execution...”[47]

Entirely absent from Swain’s account is an analysis of the objective processes that underlay the deepening political conflict. Swain offers virtually no assessment of the changes that were taking place under the impact of the New Economic Policy (NEP) within the Soviet Union and their reflection within the Party. He provides no political or intellectual portraits of Trotsky’s opponents. He does not examine the changing composition of the Bolshevik Party, or examine the phenomenon of bureaucratism that was to have such catastrophic consequences for the fate of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet society.

Swain’s treatment of Trotsky’s final exile

Swain devotes just 25 pages to the last 12 years of Trotsky’s life. To describe his treatment of those years as superficial would be a compliment. The most catastrophic event in post-World War I European history, the accession of Hitler and his Nazi party to power in Germany, barely receives a mention. Swain takes no note of the relationship between this event and the most important political decisions made by Trotsky during his final exile — his call for a political revolution in the USSR and for the founding of the Fourth International. After briefly noting that Trotsky, upon arriving in Prinkipo in 1929 following his expulsion from the

USSR, called on his supporters to remain inside the Communist International, Swain writes: “By 1933 he had changed his mind...”[48] No reference is made to the cataclysmic event that produced this change in policy — the accession of Hitler to power as a result of the betrayal of the Communist International and its German party. Swain makes no assessment of Trotsky’s writings on the German crisis. One has only to compare Swain’s near silence on the subject to E.H. Carr’s treatment of Trotsky’s efforts to rouse the German working class against the fascist threat. In his last work, *The Twilight of the Comintern*, Carr considered Trotsky’s writings on the German crisis of 1931-33 to be of such importance that he included an appendix devoted to this subject. “Trotsky,” he wrote, “maintained during the period of Hitler’s rise to power so persistent and, for the most part, so prescient a commentary on the course of events in Germany as to deserve record.”[49]

Similarly the Moscow Trials and the ensuing purges are assigned a few sentences, substantially less than Swain devotes to Trotsky’s brief personal relationship with Frida Kahlo in Mexico. The writing of Trotsky’s most important political treatise, *The Revolution Betrayed*, is noted in one sentence. Trotsky’s passionate essays on the Spanish Revolution, warning that the popular front policies of the Stalinists were clearing the path for a Franco victory, go unmentioned. *The Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, is not referred to. Swain also ignores the last great polemical documents written by Trotsky on the nature of the USSR. Finally, Swain concludes his biography with the observation that Trotsky might have done better had he quit politics after the 1917 October Revolution and devoted himself entirely to journalism, in which, presumably, Trotsky would have been able — as Swain has already told us — “to write on subjects about which he knew very little.”

Part 3: The method of Ian Thatcher

11 May 2007

I have already made brief reference to the method of Ian Thatcher. Let us return to this subject by reviewing three paragraphs that appear in the introduction to Thatcher’s biography of Trotsky.

“From Trotsky’s account of 1917 only he emerges with honor. If in 1924 one accepted the arguments of ‘Lessons of October,’ then only one man could replace the now dead Lenin, namely Leon Trotsky. It is perfectly understandable, then, that having been accused of the sins of Menshevism in 1917, Trotsky’s colleagues sought to refute his ‘Lessons of October.’ This they did in a series of speeches and articles, which were then gathered together and published in Russian and in translation in book form.

“Leading Bolsheviks (including Kamenev, Stalin, Zinoviev and Bukharin) and key representatives from the Communist International (the Comintern) and the Communist Youth League (the Komsomol) argued that Trotsky’s essay was not a genuine history of the October Revolution. If one consulted the key documents of the time and a growing supply of memoir literature, for example, Trotsky’s detractors claimed one would discover how far his memory had painted a distorted picture. Most notably,

Trotsky had minimized the roles played by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party and had exaggerated his own contribution. It was, for example, wrong to claim that in 1917 there was a long and sustained battle between a Lenin seeking to rearm the party with Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution and a right-Menshevik faction within Bolshevik ranks. In actual fact Lenin’s analysis of the events of 1917 grew out of a long-held theory of the Russian Revolution. Once Lenin had convinced colleagues of the correctness of his developing strategy, neither Lenin nor the party was in any way influenced by Trotsky or Trotskyism.

“Indeed, the anti-Trotsky case continues, the whole history of Leninism and Bolshevism before and after 1917 was one of opposition to Trotskyism. Unfortunately, Trotsky had failed to realize that he was only effective in 1917 because he acted under the guidance of the Bolshevik Party. He had not made a full commitment to becoming a Bolshevik. If he had, then he would have produced a very different history. Trotsky would, for example, have admitted his past and recent theoretical, as well as organizational, errors. Only in this way would youth understand the proper relationship between Leninism and Trotskyism, and

how to avoid the sins of the latter. ‘Lessons of October’ was an attempt by Trotsky to replace Leninism with Trotskyism. This, however, the Bolshevik Party would not allow him to achieve. The leadership understood the dangers of Trotskyism, revealed in Trotsky’s underestimation of the peasantry, and in his mistaken policies during the peace negotiations with Germany, in the debate over trade unions and on the issue of currency reform.”[50]

The significance of these paragraphs is that they exemplify a highly-contrived stylistic technique repeatedly employed by Thatcher in order to mask his falsification of history — that is, his construction of a seemingly objective historical narrative out of the factional statements of Trotsky’s mortal political enemies. Virtually everything written in the above-cited three paragraphs is a lie. The “criticisms” of Trotsky have been drawn together by Thatcher from a series of mendacious attacks written by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev in November and December 1924 in order to discredit Trotsky’s brilliant analysis of the political differences and struggles within the Bolshevik Party during the critical year of the Revolution.

Trotsky’s *Lessons of October* explored events and controversies that Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin — whose right-wing and conciliatory policies had placed them in opposition to Lenin at various points in 1917 — did not wish to have aired. Stalin and Kamenev had allied themselves with the Mensheviks in March 1917, prior to Lenin’s return to Russia. In October 1917, Kamenev and Zinoviev had opposed the insurrection. Furthermore, the role of Trotsky in securing the victory of the Bolsheviks in October 1917 was rivaled only by that played by Lenin himself. The arguments presented in the above-cited paragraphs were fabricated in order to deflect the impact of Trotsky’s criticisms in *Lessons of October* as well as to destroy his reputation as a revolutionary leader. As the historian Robert V. Daniels has written, the charges made against Trotsky in response to *Lessons of October* “were either entirely fabricated or exaggerated beyond all measure — it was the man that the offended leaders were bent on destroying, not doctrinal error.”[51]

Thatcher, however, neither explains the context of the attack on Trotsky nor challenges its factual validity. He adopts a pose of studied even-handedness in his presentation of lies and fabrications. The “anti-Trotsky case” — Thatcher’s euphemism for the bureaucracy’s gigantic slander campaign — is endowed with reasonableness, dignity and legitimacy. In effect, Thatcher offers the pages of his biography as a dumping ground for the political and historical falsifications upon which the emerging Soviet bureaucracy built its struggle against Trotsky. This insidious and dishonest technique, in which old lies are repackaged as objective historical narrative, is employed repeatedly by Thatcher.

The “myth” of 1905

Like Swain, Thatcher promises to expose “key myths” about Trotsky’s life, such as his role in the 1905 Revolution. Let us examine how Professor Thatcher goes about his work. Given the fact that Trotsky’s crucial role in the 1905 Revolution has been universally accepted by scholars throughout the world, one would imagine that Thatcher would recognize that a challenge to this scholarly consensus required a careful marshalling of new

facts and arguments. As it turns out, despite the attention called to this very issue by the publisher’s introduction (which is also cited on the back cover of the volume), Thatcher’s “demythologizing” of Trotsky’s role in 1905 takes up no more than one relatively brief *paragraph*.

He begins by writing that “It is difficult to gauge the exact influence that Trotsky had upon the course of the 1905 Revolution.” Yes, it may be difficult to determine the exact influence, but there exists a substantial body of information that permits certain informed judgments about the degree and scale of his influence. Numerous memoirs from the period testify to his commanding political presence. Trotsky became the chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet, and edited two newspapers, *Russkaya Gazeta* and *Nachalo*, which enjoyed large circulations. As if anticipating the latter objection, Thatcher claims that “We have no way of knowing how many people were affected by his journalism.”[52] Again, this is not true. In an article that appeared under his by-line in *History Review* in September 2005, Thatcher himself acknowledges that the circulation of these two newspapers may have been as high as 100,000, which was at least 20,000 higher than those of their rivals.[53] Then, Thatcher abruptly introduces a new line of argument, which is irrelevant to the issue of Trotsky’s political influence in the 1905 Revolution. “It is unlikely,” writes Thatcher, “that his words reached many peasants. He simply lacked connections with the villages, and there was not a mass distribution of his appeals to the peasantry.”[54]

This is really beside the point. The influence of Trotsky and the Russian Social Democratic movement as a whole in 1905 arose on the basis of the mass urban proletarian constituency. The St. Petersburg Soviet was a political organ of the working class. It arose on a wave of revolutionary working class activity that included the mass general strike of October 1905. The peasantry joined the unrest en masse only in 1906, in the aftermath of the physical suppression of the socialist-led working class movement.

Thatcher continues: “Even in the capital, his main stomping ground, he did not create or found any specific institute or faction. He was not, for example, the guiding force behind the emergence of the Soviet of Workers Deputies, *even though he may subsequently have been, as one participant records, ‘the unchallenged leader of the Mensheviks in the Petersburg Soviet’* [emphasis DN].”[55] Like the issue of the peasantry, the question of Trotsky’s factional affiliations is tossed in by Thatcher for no other reason than to try to build a case against the established historical record. At that point in the history of the Russian Social-Democratic movement, factional identities were far more fluid than they were to become by 1917. Indeed, Trotsky’s political position was actually strengthened by his relative independence from the main political factions. Let us note Thatcher’s awkward formulation: Trotsky “may subsequently have been” the unchallenged leader of the Mensheviks in the Soviet. Only “may have been?” Thatcher presents no evidence to the contrary, even though one can safely assume he would have trumpeted it had he been able to find it. However, he proceeds to make a novel argument. “In the memoirs of the prime minister of the day, Count Witte, Trotsky does not merit a mention ... this only confirms the limited impression Trotsky made at the time on the popular consciousness.”[56]

This is the argument of a sly trickster, not of a conscientious

scholar. Count Witte, the tsar's prime minister, failed to mention Trotsky in his memoirs. This single detail is endowed by Thatcher with extraordinary historical significance. From the failure of Witte to mention Trotsky, Thatcher claims we can draw far-ranging conclusions about Trotsky's place in popular consciousness in the autumn of 1905. One must ask, why has Thatcher made no reference to other memoirs, written by individuals who were more familiar than Count Witte, an aged aristocrat who was most at home in palaces and vast leafy estates, with what was happening in the workers' districts of St. Petersburg? It is characteristic of unscrupulous and bad scholarship to conceal or disregard historical evidence that runs counter to one's argument. But this is precisely what Thatcher has done. For example, he should have brought to the attention of his student readers the recollections of Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was a participant in the 1905 Revolution as a member of the Bolshevik faction. In his renowned *Revolutionary Silhouettes*, Lunacharsky provided this estimate of Trotsky's role in 1905:

"His popularity among the Petersburg proletariat at the time of his arrest was tremendous and increased still more as a result of his picturesque and heroic behavior in court. I must say that of all the social-democratic leaders of 1905-06 Trotsky undoubtedly showed himself, despite his youth, to be the best prepared. Less than any of them did he bear the stamp of a certain kind of émigré narrowness of outlook which, as I have said, even affected Lenin at that time. Trotsky understood better than all the others what it meant to conduct the political struggle on a broad, national scale. He emerged from the revolution having acquired an enormous degree of popularity, whereas neither Lenin nor Martov had effectively gained any at all. Plekhanov had lost a great deal, thanks to his display of quasi-Kadet tendencies. Trotsky stood then in the very front rank." [57]

Lunacharsky also recalled an incident during which Trotsky was praised, in the presence of Lenin, as the strong man of the St. Petersburg Soviet. This was a time of factional conflict between Lenin and Trotsky, and so the former did not necessarily enjoy hearing of his rival's political triumph. According to Lunacharsky, "Lenin's face darkened for a moment, then he said: 'Well, Trotsky has earned it by his brilliant and unflagging work.'" [58]

Thatcher also chose not to mention another contemporary memoir — that of the Menshevik leader Theodore Dan — which leaves no question about the immense political influence of Leon Trotsky in 1905. The political perspective with which Trotsky was now associated — the recognition of the proletarian and socialist character of the revolution — captured the imagination of substantial forces among both the Bolshevik and Menshevik tendencies.

Dan recalled "that practically speaking both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were pushed toward 'Trotskyism.' For a short time 'Trotskyism' (which at that time, to be sure, still lacked a name), for the first and last time in the history of Russian Social-Democracy, became its unifying platform. Hence it was no accident also that after the arrest (in November) of Khrustalyov, the chairman of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies, it was precisely Trotsky ... who became his natural heir, challenged by no one — for the few short days the Soviet itself still had to live." [59]

Thatcher's failure to cite important eyewitness sources that

contradict and disprove his attempt to call into question Trotsky's role in the 1905 Revolution, discredits not only his biography but places his integrity as a historian under a shadow. I must stress that his improper handling of this particular issue, i.e., Trotsky's role in 1905, is not an isolated episode. It is emblematic of the method he employs throughout his biography to discredit Trotsky.

Thatcher's falsification of the inner-party struggle

Thatcher's treatment of the political struggle that arose within the Russian Communist Party in the early 1920s is a travesty of scholarly writing. As in the introduction, Thatcher incorporates the arguments of Trotsky's factional opponents into what he attempts to palm off as an objective presentation of historical events. For example, in a crucial section of the biography that deals with the eruption of the inner-party struggle in October 1923, Thatcher writes that Trotsky "took up his anti-bureaucracy program with his usual urgency and passion, believing that the party was entering a new epoch through which *only his methods* would ensure a safe passage [emphasis DN]." [60]

Thatcher continues, "His colleagues on the party's leading bodies were, however, not convinced. They doubted whether matters were really as bad as Trotsky depicted. Yes, there were economic problems, but these were quite expected. In any case there was no imminent danger of collapse. The party anticipated several years of hard and steady work before it could claim to have fully rectified the economy. Looking at the party, Trotsky's comrades claimed that they could congratulate themselves on educating a new generation of cadres. The influx of this fresh blood would no doubt expedite the resolution of important tasks. Having rejected Trotsky's analysis of imagined ills besetting the regime, a majority of the old Bolsheviks wondered whether he could be trusted to develop sound and sensible policies. If Trotsky was prone to exaggeration of difficulties, he was, they argued, remarkably vague in his solutions. For a majority of the Politburo, Trotsky was part of a problem, not an answer. For example, if he was concerned by an absence of systematic leadership why did he not attend important meetings of the Council of Labour and Defense and of the Cabinet? There was little evidence of conscientiousness in Trotsky's work habits. Furthermore, there was a marked absence of concrete proposals from Trotsky. This was hardly surprising, since his policy record was far from promising. In recent times Trotsky had suffered a series of defeats as he opposed Lenin over, amongst other matters, the Brest-Litovsk peace and the trade unions. For his colleagues, Trotsky's discontents were not rooted in reality, but in a hurt sense of pride stemming from personal disappointments. Thus, Trotsky could not have been pleased when, in April 1923, the Twelfth Congress shelved his more militant approach to religious affairs. In September 1923, Trotsky was certainly upset by personnel changes to the Military-Revolutionary Committee. Finally, and most annoying of all for Trotsky, came the Central Committee's refusal to grant him dictatorial powers. Trotsky was warned that his unfounded criticisms were encouraging anti-party platforms, sowing unnecessary disruption to important party work, and threatening a war between older and younger generations." [61]

This passage, as written by Thatcher, creates the impression that the majority on the Politburo — euphemistically referred to

as “Trotsky’s comrades” — was responding to Trotsky’s criticism in a manner that was both restrained and reasonable. It was confronted, in the person of Trotsky, with something of a loose cannon, with whom it was hard, if not impossible, to work. He pestered his “colleagues” with exaggerated warnings and unreasonable demands, while failing to carry out the assignments for which he was responsible. Moreover, Trotsky had a poor grasp of reality and a history of stirring up trouble, even with Lenin; was motivated by subjective bitterness, and, worst of all, was demanding dictatorial powers. Thatcher’s presentation clearly invites his students to form a negative opinion of Trotsky and his political work.

What Thatcher has not communicated to his readers is that the above-quoted passage is his own tendentious rephrasing of an unscrupulous and dishonest factional document produced by Trotsky’s bitter political opponents — soporifically referred to by Thatcher as “comrades” and “colleagues” — on October 19, 1923, in response to Trotsky’s important letter of October 8, 1923 and the famous oppositional Letter of the 46 of October 15, 1923. There are no quotation marks and no footnotes. There is no clear indication given by Thatcher that the arguments he so benignly summarizes were, in fact, a pack of factionally-motivated lies and half-truths.[62]

Nor does Thatcher inform his readers that Trotsky prepared a withering response to this letter, dispatched on October 23, 1923, in which the accusations of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin (who had formed an unprincipled anti-Trotsky faction known as the Triumvirs) were refuted.

One has only to consult E. H. Carr’s *The Interregnum*, in which this material is reviewed (or at least that part of it that had come to light by the early 1950s), to recognize the deliberately misleading character of Thatcher’s approach. Carr cites passages from Trotsky’s “stinging retort” to the Triumvirs, and leaves no doubt as to where truth lay in this exchange.[63]

Trotsky’s speech at the 13th Congress

One of Deutscher’s great achievements as a biographer was his portrayal of the heroism and pathos of Trotsky’s struggle, under increasingly difficult circumstances, against the immense and reactionary bureaucracy arrayed against him. Thatcher, determined to erase the historical record, employs rhetorical tricks, incompatible with serious scholarship, to belittle Trotsky’s struggle and portray it in a demeaning and unflattering light. Once again I must call attention to his deceptive use of citations. Thatcher refers to Trotsky’s main speech at the Thirteenth Party Congress in May 1924, and writes, “It was, it has been argued, ‘the most inept speech of his career.’”[64]

Who, one wonders, was the original author of this damning judgment? Was it written, perhaps, by a participant at the Congress, either an opponent or supporter of Trotsky? As it turns out, the source is to be found in a volume, published by the University of Toronto Press in 1974, of *Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. This volume includes a set of documents from the Thirteenth Congress, which is briefly introduced by Professor Richard Gregor, the volume’s editor. Gregor writes that Trotsky “made what may well be the most inept speech of his career.”[65] He offers no argument in support

of this appraisal, and the speech itself is not reproduced. Furthermore, Gregor is hardly a historian to whom one turns for a well-considered and unbiased judgment of Soviet politics.[66] Other than serving the utilitarian purpose of belittling Trotsky, there is no compelling reason why Gregor’s passing remark about the speech to the Thirteenth Congress should have been cited as if it were an authoritative judgment.

Let us further examine Thatcher’s use of Trotsky’s Thirteenth Congress speech, which concluded with the well-known and oft-cited phrase, “Right or wrong this is my party, and I will take responsibility for its decision to the end.” Thatcher himself quotes several sentences from Trotsky’s speech, including the sentence cited above. He then writes, “Trotsky could thus have no grounds for complaint when the Thirteenth Congress affirmed the anti-Trotsky resolution of the Thirteenth Conference.”[67] It all seems rather straightforward. Trotsky said, my party right or wrong, so how could he object when it passes a resolution directed against him? But Thatcher has withheld from his readers those passages that show Trotsky’s speech to be far more subtle and combative than the citation, as provided in Thatcher’s text, indicates. Trotsky states emphatically his disagreement with the resolution, and asserts his responsibility to argue against those policies he considers incorrect.[68] By presenting a bowdlerized citation, Thatcher misrepresents Trotsky’s position and legitimizes the actions taken against him by his opponents.

Thatcher falsifies the Lenin-Trotsky relationship

Thatcher asserts that “Lenin’s relationship with Trotsky was highly problematic.” He contends that in Lenin’s political Testament of December 1922 “Trotsky was not given a recommendation higher than any other comrade.” This is not true. While expressing reservations over Trotsky’s “excessive self-assurance” and “excessive preoccupation with the purely administrative side of work,” Lenin said he was “distinguished by his outstanding ability” and “personally perhaps the most capable man in the present C.C. [Central Committee]...”[69] The same Testament warned against Stalin’s accumulation of “unlimited authority concentrated in his hands...”[70] Lenin’s famous addendum to his Testament, which Thatcher fails to mention, urged the Central Committee to remove Stalin from the position of general secretary.[71] Thatcher then writes: “Lenin was unlikely to have given his seal of approval to Trotsky for the post of leader because, even in 1922-23 when he relied upon the Commissar of War to present some of his views, he remained suspicious of him. *Lenin’s biographer has emphasized that he would have dropped Trotsky at the next available opportunity [emphasis DN].*”[72]

This is a deliberately misleading and false presentation. Numerous historical studies have established, based on a well-documented record, that the last months of Lenin’s life were dominated by his growing suspicion of and hostility to Stalin. Lenin’s increasing distrust of Stalin was expressed in several documents that he wrote in the months and weeks before his career-ending stroke in March 1923. During the same period, Lenin drew ever closer to Trotsky, whom he viewed as his most important ally in the developing struggle against Stalin. But let us concede that the political developments in the critical period

between December 1922 and March 1923 allow for varied interpretations. That still leaves us with Thatcher's reference to the alleged finding of "Lenin's biographer" that Lenin, had he lived, "would have dropped Trotsky at the next available opportunity."

The biographer cited in the relevant footnote is Robert Service, author of a three-volume study of Lenin. This is not the place for an evaluation of the qualities of Mr. Service's biography, of which I do not have a high opinion. But the issue here concerns Thatcher's use of citations. Turning to page 273-74 of the Service biography (as indicated in the footnote), there is no reference to a plan by Lenin to get rid of Trotsky. In fact, Service offers an entirely different assessment of Lenin's plans. While in the past, according to Service, Lenin had used Stalin to control Trotsky, "the disputes with Stalin over policies on foreign trade and other matters reversed the situation: Trotsky was needed in order to control the ever more rampant Stalin." Despite his past conflicts with Trotsky, "The October Revolution and the Civil War had brought them together, and Lenin was inviting Trotsky to resume close collaboration." [73] A few pages later, Service comments further on Lenin's view of Trotsky and Stalin: "Of the two men, he had come to prefer Trotsky despite his reservations. This was obvious in Lenin's recent letters seeking an alliance with him on questions of the day where Stalin stood in his way. In late December [1922], too, Lenin asked Krupskaya to confide the message to Trotsky that his feelings towards him since Trotsky had escaped from Siberia to London in 1902 had not changed and would not change 'until death itself.'" [74] Once again, we see that Thatcher, in the interest of his own campaign to discredit Trotsky, has attributed to another historian a statement he has not made.

Historians, like everyone else, are fallible. They make mistakes. Not every incorrect citation is proof of professional incompetence, let alone of a secret plan to distort and falsify. When one comes across such errors it is necessary to maintain a sense of proportion. But the problem that presents itself in the Thatcher biography is not a series of isolated mistakes but a system of distortion and falsification. Thatcher's presentation is designed to create among readers — especially students — not only a false image of Trotsky, but also a disoriented and distorted conception of an entire historical epoch.

What finds expression in the biographies written by Thatcher and Swain is a process that may be legitimately described as the erosion of historical truth. The historical image of Trotsky as a great revolutionary fighter and thinker that emerged out of the exposure of Stalin's lies and crimes — that is, out of the discrediting of the pervasive anti-Trotsky demonology that was pumped out of the Soviet Union (and, for that matter, all of Eastern Europe and China) and sustained by countless academics affiliated with Stalinist parties all over the world — is once again under attack. A sort of anti-historical intellectual counter-revolution is in progress, to which Thatcher and Swain are making their own disreputable contributions. Only in this way can we understand their zeal in attempting to belittle Trotsky, in even making him appear ridiculous.

Problems of Everyday Life

Let us, for example, examine Thatcher's treatment of Trotsky's remarkable essays published under the title *Problems of Everyday Life*. Thatcher strains to present Trotsky as an effete snob, who "was far from impressed with the general mores of Russian society. He viewed the mass of Russians as uncultured. He described them as illiterate, inefficient, dirty, unpunctual, prone to swearing and abusive language, and under the sway of superstition." [75] Presented in this way, the reader is clearly encouraged to view Trotsky as an elitist, distant and remote from the great mass of the Russian people. This intended image is reinforced by Thatcher's sarcastic remark that "one cannot help thinking that his ideal human type consisted of his own habits writ large. His advice is littered with its own brand of simplification." [76]

Thatcher's summary is a spiteful and dishonest caricature of Trotsky's writings on *Problems of Everyday Life*. What is portrayed by Thatcher as an example of Trotsky's self-aggrandizing conceit, an immodest tribute to his own special qualities, is, when properly and knowledgeably viewed in the context of the history of the Russian revolutionary movement, one of the finest and most deeply felt elucidations of the relationship between culture, the development of proletarian class consciousness and the struggle for socialism. Presented by Thatcher as an irritating laundry list of Trotsky's personal objections to the Russian workers, the characteristics that are cited — illiterate, inefficient, prone to swearing, etc. — were all manifestations of the terrible oppression suffered by the masses in Tsarist Russia. They were part of what generations of the best elements in the democratic and socialist intelligentsia often described as "our terrible Russian reality." Their struggle against the shameful expressions of human degradation eventually found a profound response in the working class. [77]

When these writings are read as contributions to the development of class consciousness and kul'turnost, it is possible to appreciate the broader dimensions and ramifications of the issues raised by Trotsky in his *Problems of Everyday Life*, and of the significance of his essays such as "The Struggle for Cultured Speech" and "Civility and politeness as a necessary lubricant in daily relations." Interestingly, as Professor S. A. Smith points out, "the struggle for cultured speech faded from the political agenda" in the late 1920s, after Stalin secured his grip on power. [78] It is only necessary to add that much of what Trotsky writes in these articles is not only of historical interest, let alone merely relevant to a Russian audience. As we today confront our own terrible reality, where culture is under relentless attack and every form of social backwardness spawned and encouraged, *Problems of Everyday Life* remains a book for our times.

At certain points in his biography, Thatcher descends to levels that can only be described as utterly absurd. He declares that "One can even claim that Trotsky was as dismissive of his female compatriots as any other egocentric male." [79] He offers as proof a passage from a librarian's memoir, which recalled that Trotsky's wife apparently went to borrow a journal on his behalf. And so, writes Thatcher, "we discover Trotsky using his wife as a (unpaid?) secretary..." [80] Thatcher also berates Trotsky for failing, as he had advised in one of his essays, "to view reality through a woman's eyes very seriously." What evidence does Thatcher present to support this reprimand? "Certainly he did not advocate

a female candidate to replace Lenin; nor did he produce the promised fuller account of what he thought a woman's perspective

on the world might be.” [81] How does one begin to reply to such criticisms? [82]

Part 4: The relevance of Trotsky

12 May 2007

Thatcher on the impossibility of revolution

There are two persistent and interrelated arguments Thatcher makes repeatedly in his biography: 1) There is no reason to believe that either Russian or European history would have developed any differently had Trotsky defeated Stalin; and 2) Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin were, on the whole, unfair. Dealing with economic policy, Thatcher states, “Of course, even if by some miracle Trotsky had been able to grasp the reins of power, there are many reasons to doubt whether he would have enjoyed the sorts of policy successes his program promised. One can question, for example, whether a Soviet economy managed by Trotsky could have provided industrial expansion and improved living standards.” [83]

Yes, “one can question” anything. But the issue is not whether one can determine, to the point of certainty, the success of the program of the Left Opposition. Certainty is not attainable, nor is that the issue. The real question is: did the Left Opposition demonstrate significantly greater understanding of the problems of the Soviet economy than the Stalinist leadership, and did the Left Opposition exhibit far greater foresight than the bureaucracy in anticipating problems and proposing ameliorative action before disaster struck? To these two critical questions, we can reply unambiguously in the affirmative. On this basis, we can then ask whether — based on a more timely response to looming dangers and the avoidance of their worst consequences — it is reasonable to believe that the Soviet economy would have achieved greater successes and with far fewer human sacrifices. Here, too, the answer is clearly yes. Thatcher never explores the issues in this way. He makes no reference to the detailed program produced by the Left Opposition in 1927. Instead, we are left with a peculiar form of fatalism that translates into a historical apology for Stalin and Stalinism. Thatcher takes this same approach to every important issue of international revolutionary policy.

Turning to the disastrous defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927, in which Stalin's subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the bourgeois Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-shek played a major role, Thatcher asserts that “even had the CCP abandoned the Kuomintang in 1926, there is no evidence to suggest that it could have enjoyed any greater success in 1927.” [84] What “evidence” has Thatcher assessed? Where did he conduct research into the events of 1925-27? There is a rich body of political and historical literature, a significant amount of which was produced by Chinese revolutionaries, analyzing the catastrophic consequences of Stalin's policies in the period of 1925-27.

There is no evidence that Thatcher is in the least familiar with this literature. It is a historical fact that Chiang Kai-shek's massacre of Shanghai workers in April 1927 was facilitated by the failure of the Communist Party to take defensive measures that might have either forestalled the attack, or at least allowed

the cadre to beat it back. The passivity of the CCP was dictated by Stalin's insistence that the Chinese Communists avoid antagonizing Chiang and the bourgeois Kuomintang. For nearly a year, Trotsky and the Left Opposition warned of the suicidal dangers arising from such a policy. To claim that even if their warnings had been acted upon in a timely manner they would have made no difference is to elevate hopelessness to the status of an immutable historical condition, at least as far as socialist revolution is concerned.

On the question of Germany, Thatcher argues along the same lines. “There is a certain attraction to Trotsky's account of KPD blunders and the possibility that had the German communists adopted a different course Hitler's triumph could have been avoided,” Thatcher writes. “The support such a case has received in subsequent studies is hardly surprising. After all, who does not wish that the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) had never taken power? One can still question, however, whether history would have been so different had Trotsky had a greater influence on events. ... Trotsky overestimated the power of the workers and underestimated the strength of fascism. It is possible that Hitler would have risen to power even over a coalition of communists and social democrats. ... A change in KPD policies as demanded by Trotsky might have been insufficient to keep the NSDAP from government.” [85]

The critical role played by the catastrophic policies of the two main working class parties — the SPD and KPD — in facilitating Hitler's victory is not a matter of serious historical controversy. There are, of course, many questions as to why these parties pursued such disastrous and self-destructive policies. But it is as close to a historical certainty as anything can be that the working class parties, despite their millions of members, pursued policies that ultimately reduced themselves to a state of complete political impotence. To state that the action or inaction of two mass parties would, in any event, have had no effect on the outcome of the political struggle in Germany, that Hitler would have conquered *no matter what*, is to render the whole subject of the working class movement and socialist politics politically and historically irrelevant. This is the conclusion that flows inevitably from Thatcher's argument. [86]

While Thatcher repeatedly insists that the adoption of Trotsky's policies would have made no difference whatsoever, he argues time and again against Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin. He is so unshakeable in his hostility toward Trotsky and sympathy for Stalin that one cannot help but think that his work is driven by an unstated political agenda. Long ago, in his justly famous *What Is History?*, E.H. Carr advised us to listen carefully for the buzzing of bees in a historian's bonnet. The bees in a good historian's bonnet emit a pleasing and sophisticated sound that harmonizes beautifully with the factual material that it accompanies. But the bees in Mr. Thatcher's bonnet emit a very loud, discordant and tendentious sound, rather like Stalinist hornets. My concern here

is not Thatcher's politics — to which he is personally entitled — but his treatment of historical facts. The bees (or even hornets) only become a serious problem when their buzzing is so loud that one cannot hear the history.

Thatcher defends Stalin

Defending Stalin against Trotsky's criticism, Thatcher declares that the latter's "thesis of a Stalinist betrayal of world revolution is as one-sided as it is unconvincing. It ignores, for example, the positive aspects of the Popular-Front tactic, evident in the expansion of the communist parties' support and influence." [87] At this point, as Professor Thatcher approaches the conclusion of his biography, the distinction between history writing and tendency polemics has been obliterated. The pretense of writing a biography is virtually dropped, and the reader is being fed what used to be called the Stalinist party-line. Thatcher, extolling the Stalinist "successes" of the Popular Front era, ignores Trotsky's analysis of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, which implemented — in the aftermath of the catastrophes of Stalinist "Third Period" ultra-leftism — the shift toward alliances with bourgeois parties. Thatcher makes no mention of Trotsky's assessment that the Seventh Congress and the adoption of Popular Frontism signified the repudiation of any link between the Comintern and the perspective of socialist revolution — a development rooted in the foreign policy interests of the Stalinist regime in the USSR. This assessment, it should be pointed out, was endorsed by E.H. Carr, in *The Twilight of the Comintern*. [88]

Thatcher continues, "There is also no evidence to confirm Trotsky's contention, however, that Comintern tactics were dependent on the demands of Soviet diplomacy." [89] Here, Thatcher is not only arguing against Trotsky, but the overwhelming weight of historical evidence. An author who makes such a claim surrenders any right to be taken seriously as a historian. How would Thatcher explain the overnight change in the policies of Communist parties all over the world, after the negotiation of the Stalin-Hitler Pact of August 1939? There is also the matter of the physical liquidation of large numbers of leading members of national Communist parties during the Stalinist Terror of 1937-39. Virtually the entire leadership of the Polish Communist Party was wiped out, because Stalin deemed it susceptible to Trotskyist influences. Large sections of the old leadership of the German Communist Party, which had escaped Hitler by fleeing to the USSR, were executed in Moscow during the Terror. The KPD General Secretary, Ernst Thaelmann, who had been captured by the Nazis, was abandoned by Stalin, who declined an opportunity to have him released to Soviet custody after the signing of the Pact with Hitler. Thaelmann perished in a concentration camp. The leadership that emerged from Soviet exile in 1945 to assume control of what was to become the East German state consisted of individuals who had been left alive by Stalin — often at the price of denouncing their KPD comrades. Does not all this constitute a form of subordination of Communist parties to the dictates of the Soviet regime?

An understanding of the pervasive Soviet influence in the policies of the Comintern requires an examination of the activities of the GPU (which became the NKVD), the secret police of the Stalinist regime. Trotsky examined this issue in detail in one of

his last articles, *The Comintern and the GPU*, which he completed less than two weeks before his own assassination by a Stalinist agent. [90] Citing the testimony of Walter Krivitsky, who defected from the GPU, and Benjamin Gitlow, an ex-member of the leadership of the American Communist Party, Trotsky documented the control exerted by GPU agents over the Stalinist organizations. He included an analysis of financial transactions, demonstrating how the flow of cash was used to direct and control the policies of local Stalinist parties. He also demonstrated the financial dependence of these parties on cash from Moscow. Thatcher does not examine, analyze and reply to this document — the last major statement written by Trotsky before his death on August 21, 1940. He simply ignores it.

Thatcher also mounts an impassioned defense of Stalin on another front. He writes, "Finally, Trotsky clearly underestimated the capacity of the USSR to withstand a German declaration of war, which eventually occurred in June 1941. Stalin proved himself a capable war leader, standing firm at the helm in the initial confusion surrounding the first moments of the German attack." [91] Two issues are raised here: first, Trotsky's assessment of the resilience of the Soviet Union in the event of war; second, Stalin's role as a war leader. In response to the first, Thatcher again falsifies Trotsky's position. He does not cite from Trotsky's most comprehensive statement on the Soviet Union's powers of resistance in the event of war. *The Red Army*, written by Trotsky in March 1934, came to a conclusion that is the exact opposite to the one attributed to him by Thatcher. "He who is able to read the books of history," wrote Trotsky, "will understand beforehand that should the Russian Revolution, which has continued ebbing and flowing for almost 30 years — since 1905 — be forced to direct its stream into the channel of war, it will unleash a terrific and overwhelming force." [92] This statement hardly qualifies as an underestimation of the USSR.

As for Thatcher's special tribute to Stalin as a war leader, it is curious that he chooses to cite specifically his activities during the "first moments of the German attack." He certainly knows that there are many questions surrounding Stalin's response to the German invasion of June 22, 1941. In numerous books, including the memoirs of leading Soviet officials, it has been claimed that Stalin was emotionally devastated by the news of the invasion, which exposed the utter bankruptcy of his diplomatic game with Hitler and now confronted the USSR with the possibility of total ruin. Thatcher is not unaware of this, and includes a footnote, which states: "Several textbooks claim that when Germany invaded the USSR Stalin was thrown into a panic and it would have been possible to overthrow him ... These claims are convincingly refuted by S.J. Main, 'Stalin in 1941.'" [93]

To claim that the controversy surrounding Stalin's activities in the aftermath of the German invasion has been "convincingly refuted" by Professor Main's brief two-page article, which is merely a comment on a much longer article by another historian, is a travesty of scholarly judgment and an exercise in political apologetics. [94] Moreover, the issue of what Stalin did or did not do in the last week of June 1941, after the Nazis invaded, is of secondary significance in assessing his responsibility for the catastrophe that overwhelmed the Soviet Union. The horrifying human losses suffered by the Soviet people were the direct consequence of the policies and actions of Stalin: the murder of

the leading Soviet marshals and generals (such as Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Gamarnik, Blucher, Yegorov, and Primakov); the extermination of 75 percent of the Red Army officer corps in 1937-38; the killing of the finest representatives of the socialist intelligentsia and working class; the systematic disorganization and dismantling of Soviet military defenses so as not to provoke Hitler; the refusal to act on intelligence that a German invasion was imminent; etc. All this has been amply documented in innumerable books and scholarly articles. But Thatcher ignores it and proclaims that a two page comment in one journal settles the question of Stalin's role in World War II.[95]

Thatcher's references to "the Bronsteins"

Beneath the accumulating weight of the falsification of Trotsky's life and crude apologies for Stalin, the intentions of the author himself appear increasingly dubious, not only in an intellectual sense but in a moral one as well. In this regard, it is necessary to take note of Thatcher's repeated references to Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, as "the Bronsteins." I noted no less than nine occasions when Thatcher refers to the couple in this way, usually when describing their private living arrangements or their movement from one place of exile to another. Thatcher tells us that "The Bronsteins were living largely off credit in Vienna" (p. 52); "Finally, the Bronsteins were allowed to go to Barcelona" (p. 77); "the Bronsteins were taken over the border" (p. 164); Prinkipo "provided a home for the majority of the Bronsteins" (p. 165); "in France, for example, the Bronsteins had no less than a dozen addresses of varying leases" (p. 188); "The move to North America, where the Bronsteins arrived in mid-January 1937..." (p. 189); and so on. Why does Thatcher so persistently identify Trotsky and Sedova as "the Bronsteins"? First of all, there is no factual basis for doing so. The two people he is referring to did not make use of that surname. Trotsky's wife, Natalia, was known by her own legal family name, Sedova. The two children of Lev Davidovitch and Natalya — Lev and Sergei — used Sedov as their surname. Trotsky, aside from the fact that he never referred to himself as Bronstein after 1902, used Sedov as his own legal name.

This is not, as might first seem to those unfamiliar with Trotsky's life, a small matter. Like every other aspect of his life, even the name by which he and his family were identified assumed political significance. In January 1937, Trotsky commented on the fact that the Soviet press, upon reporting the arrest of his youngest son on charges of sabotage, referred to him as Sergei *Bronstein*.

Trotsky wrote, "Since 1902 I have invariably borne the name of Trotsky. In view of my illegality, my children under czarism were recorded under their mother's family name — Sedov. So as not to force them to change the name to which they had become accustomed, under Soviet power I took for 'civic purposes' the name Sedov (according to Soviet law, a husband can, as is well known, take the name of the wife). The Soviet passport under which I, my wife, and elder son were sent into exile was made out in the name of the Sedov family. My sons, thus, have never used the name Bronstein. Just why is it now necessary to drag out this name? The answer is obvious: because of its Jewish sound. To this it is necessary to add that my son is accused of nothing more or less than an attempt to slaughter workers. Is

this really so different from accusing the Jews of ritually using the blood of Christians?"[96]

It is impossible to believe that Thatcher is not familiar with this and other occasions where Trotsky denounced and identified the use of his original family name as an anti-Semitic ploy. Knowing that it is factually incorrect to do so, why then does Thatcher refer to the Bronsteins, rather than the Trotskys or the Sedovs? The moral burden falls upon him to dispel the legitimate suspicion that certain base calculations are in play. I am not stating that Thatcher is an anti-Semite. But it is beyond doubt that he is, for whatever reasons, repeatedly calling to the reader's attention the Jewish origins of Trotsky.[97] He should explain his reasons for doing so.

Thatcher's falsification of the Dewey Commission

Thatcher devotes about two pages to the Moscow Trials and Trotsky's struggle to refute their charges. He discusses the formation of the Dewey Commission, and the hearings that were held in April 1937 in Mexico "where the Bronsteins were lodging." [98] After a brief review of the proceedings and the testimony of Leon Trotsky, Thatcher arrives at the Commission's findings. He writes, "*The Moscow trials were declared an unreliable guide to the truth, the accusations against Trotsky unproven* [emphasis DN]." [99]

This is a falsification of the findings of the Dewey Commission. On September 21, 1937, the Commission announced its findings, of which there were 23. The first 21 consisted of refutations of specific allegations against Trotsky that were crucial to the claims of the Soviet prosecutors. The decisive summary conclusions were presented in Findings 22 and 23. They stated, "22. We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups. 23. We therefore find Trotsky and [his son] Sedov not guilty." [100]

Note the difference between the words used by the Dewey Commission and those selected by Thatcher. There is a profound difference between defining a proceeding as a "frame-up" (the word used by the Dewey Commission) and "an unreliable guide to the truth" (the words used by Thatcher). A frame-up is a pseudo-legal proceeding in which evidence is contrived and concocted to produce a predetermined verdict of guilty. It is not merely an "unreliable guide to truth." Its aim is the suppression of truth and it makes use of lies to facilitate, under a pseudo-legal cover, the imprisonment or execution of a wrongfully-accused individual. Thatcher could have simply quoted finding 22 of the Dewey Commission. Instead he used five words "unreliable guide to the truth" to say something very different from the one word "frame-up" used by the Commission. [101]

There is also a fundamental *legal* difference between a finding of not guilty (handed down by the Dewey Commission) and a verdict of "unproven" (the term used by Thatcher). A verdict of not guilty leaves the presumption of the defendant's innocence undisturbed. A verdict of "unproven" is quite a different matter. It carries the implication that while there existed insufficient evidence to return a verdict of guilty, the jury was not convinced of the innocence of the accused. Thatcher, who lived and taught in Glasgow for many years, knows very well the distinction between "not guilty" and "unproven." One of the peculiarities of Scot law is that it allows juries to return a verdict of "not proven."

This has been a subject of substantial legal controversy for several centuries precisely because of the lingering moral shadow that the so-called “third verdict” leaves behind on the accused.[102] It requires a high degree of naiveté to believe that Thatcher’s substitution of “unproven” for the words “not guilty” is an innocent error. He is unquestionably guilty of deliberately falsifying the findings of the Dewey Commission.

What, the reader may ask, is the purpose of such a falsification? And why should one treat it as such a grave matter? The reader should bear in mind the methods employed by Thatcher and Swain, which we have already examined. As they quote each other and their own works are cited by others, the virus of falsification spreads insidiously via a complacent academic community into the broader public. In this particular example, the immense original force of the Dewey Commission verdict is diluted and falsified. As the denunciation of the Moscow trials as a frame-up and the unambiguous acquittal of Trotsky and Sedov fall from historical memory, Thatcher’s formulations — eventually to be recycled by other careless historians — contribute to the erosion of previously-established facts and objective truth.

Thatcher’s final comments on Trotsky’s historical role

After more than 200 pages of distortions, half-truths and outright falsifications, we arrive at Thatcher’s final appraisal of Trotsky. “Trotsky,” he informs his readers, “was not a great political leader or prophet. He spent the majority of his political life in opposition, the exponent of views commanding minority support.”[103] To this remark his readers should respond, “Well, Professor Thatcher, that is simply your opinion.” And, indeed, it is an opinion unsupported by credible scholarly work, and therefore the reader has no reason to take it particularly seriously. One is reminded of Hegel’s admonition, “What is more useless than a string of bald opinions, and what is more unimportant?”[104] As for the basis of this opinion — that Trotsky spent most of his life in opposition — this tells us more about Thatcher’s views and character than it does about the revolutionary leader upon whom he is passing judgment.

Thatcher continues, “Is there anything of lasting merit in Trotsky’s works, or were he and his writings of relevance only to his time and experience? An answer to this question will depend, at least in part, on how one rates Marxism and Trotsky’s standing as a Marxist.

“To begin with the latter question, it is doubtful whether Trotsky made any lasting contribution to Marxist thought. He may even have been unaware of some of Marx’s basic writings. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, for example, Trotsky insisted several times that Marx had nothing to say about Russia, that the master expected a socialist revolution to begin in the countries of advanced capitalism. This ignores Marx’s interest in the question of whether ‘backward’ Russia could bypass capitalism and undertake a direct transition to socialism on the basis of the peasant commune.

“Marx’s response, of evident relevance to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, was given in several of his writings, including the Preface to the (1881) Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. Here Marx answered in the affirmative. A Russian Revolution could aim at a direct transition to socialism,

but only if it sparked socialist revolutions in the advanced West. If Trotsky had been aware of this and other texts in which Marx addressed the problem of building socialism in Russia, he would surely have claimed a stronger link between the theory of permanent revolution and Marx, as well as less originality for his conception of the revolutionary process in Russia. If we assume that Trotsky did not know of Marx’s concern with Russia, then this points to the conclusion that Trotsky’s Marxism was a product of the Russian environment [emphasis DN].”[105]

In this passage the author combines, in equal measure, ignorance and insolence. This is the sort of writing that could have appeared in scores of Stalinist journals prior to the collapse of the USSR. The specific claim that Trotsky “insisted that Marx had nothing to say about Russia,” is a crass misrepresentation of what Trotsky wrote. He explained precisely why it was impossible to derive from a mechanical application of Marx’s historical conceptions an analysis of Soviet society.[106] In this, Trotsky demonstrated not his ignorance of Marx’s work, but his creative approach to Marxism. Moreover, he based key arguments in *Revolution Betrayed* on observations of Marx. Trotsky, to cite just one example, employed the concept of “generalized want,” suggested by Marx in *The German Ideology*, to explain the origins and social function of the bureaucracy in the USSR as the “gendarme” — the police enforcer of social inequality.

Thatcher’s claim that Trotsky was not aware of Marx’s writings in 1881 on the prospects for socialism in Russia, and, moreover, that the former did not recognize the link between his own theory of permanent revolution and Marx’s work is easily contradicted. Thatcher apparently has not read the essay, “Marxism and the Relation between Proletarian and Peasant Revolution,” written in December 1928. Trotsky specifically reviewed the 1881 correspondence between Marx and the old Russian revolutionist Vera Zasulich, in which Marx worked through the theoretical issues that were concisely summed up in the January 1882 (not 1881 as Thatcher writes) preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. As for his own intellectual debt to Marx, Trotsky wrote in this essay that “the idea of permanent revolution was one of the most important ideas of Marx and Engels.”[107] So here we have Thatcher arguing in his conclusion that Trotsky was unfamiliar with key writings of Marx on the subject of Russia, and it turns out that this fantastic hypothesis is merely the product of Thatcher’s failure to do his basic intellectual homework![108]

Having sarcastically posed the question of Trotsky’s relevance, Thatcher should tell us why he has written a 240-page book to proclaim his irrelevance. Why did he establish, with his former colleague from the University of Glasgow, James D. White, the short-lived *Journal of Trotsky Studies*, whose publication represented Thatcher’s first major anti-Trotsky project? Why has Swain written his 236-page biography?

It is worth noting that Thatcher has no doubts about the relevance of Stalin. In a review of several studies of Stalin that appeared around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the dictator’s death, Thatcher, revealing the bees in his bonnet, confessed a certain nostalgia for “a benign version of Stalinism,” adding, “Stalin continues to fascinate and to cause moments of moral uncertainty.”[109] What sort of moral uncertainty, one is compelled to wonder, can be caused by the actions of a blood-drenched tyrant who slaughtered an entire generation of

socialists, betrayed the principles of the October Revolution, and set into motion the process that led to the destruction of the Soviet Union?

Conclusion

It has been an unpleasant experience to work through the volumes of Mr. Swain and Mr. Thatcher. Despite the length of this essay, I have by no means answered all the distortions and falsifications that appear in their work. Such a comprehensive account would require nothing less than a volume of its own. But I believe that this review has established that neither biography has the slightest scholarly merit. Still, the questions remain: Why have these books been written? What is their purpose? The answer, I believe, is to be found in politics. While Thatcher speculates cynically at the conclusion of his book on the relevance of its subject, he hardly believes that Trotsky is so marginal a historical figure. Indeed, Thatcher's obsessive interest in Trotsky suggests he holds privately a very different view. And well he should, for the significance of Trotsky as a historical figure is inextricably linked to the vicissitudes of the international class struggle. To determine the relevance of Trotsky, one must ask several other questions: What is the relevance of socialism? What is the relevance of Marxism? What is the relevance of the class struggle in modern society? Has capitalism attained a new and permanent level of stability? Has the very concept of a "crisis of capitalism" become historically outmoded? These are the questions that must be asked when considering the place of Trotsky in history and the significance of his ideas in the contemporary world.

Leon Trotsky's ideas do not seem all that remote in the light of objective developments. First, the developments in technology and their impact upon the processes of production and exchange have produced a global economy that places tremendous strains on the old national-state structures. Moreover, the precipitous decline in the world economic position of the United States significantly limits the likelihood of a new world order that will regulate inter-state relations and maintain global stability. The world capitalist system is heading toward a systemic breakdown on the scale of the period of 1914-45.

The fragility of the existing global economic and geo-political order has been intensified by domestic class-based social tensions. During the past quarter century, we have witnessed a collapse of the old mass parties and organizations of the working class. It is hard to think of a political party anywhere in the world that retains any significant degree of credibility among the masses. The old Communist parties, Social Democratic parties, and Labour parties have either collapsed — as is the case with most of the Stalinist organizations — or stagger on as organizations sustained only by a thoroughly corrupt apparatus. To describe them as "working class" is to completely abuse the historical meaning of the term. They are all right-wing bourgeois parties, no less committed to the defense of capitalism and the imperialist interests of the global transnationals than the old traditional bourgeois parties.

But this collapse of every form of Stalinist and Social Democratic reformist-based working class organization proceeds against the backdrop of rising social inequality and intensifying class antagonisms. The old organizations simply lack the political

means and credibility to harness the deepening social discontent and channel it into paths that do not threaten the stability of the capitalist system. At some point the intensification of class conflict will find intellectual and political expression. There will be a search for alternatives to the present set-up. This will create an intellectual and social constituency for a revival of interest in the history of the socialist movement, in the revolutionary struggles of the past. It is inevitable that the development of such a climate will lead to a renewed interest in the life and work of Leon Trotsky. That is what happened during the last great wave of radicalization of workers and students. The more politically-thoughtful sections of the bourgeoisie recognize this danger and fear it. It is worth noting the perceptive words of Robert J. Alexander, who remarked in his encyclopedic volume on *International Trotskyism*, published by Duke University in 1991:

"Although International Trotskyism does not enjoy the support of a well established regime, as did the heirs of Stalinism, the persistence of the movement in a wide variety of countries together with the instability of the political life of most of the world's nations means that the possibility that a Trotskyist party might come to power in the foreseeable future cannot be totally ruled out." [110]

This is, as we know, the era of preemptive war, and these works represent a sort of preemptive strike against the reemergence of Trotskyist influence. This is why distinguished publishing houses like Routledge and Longman commission biographies such as those produced by Swain and Thatcher.

The political crisis intersects with a profound intellectual crisis. How is one to explain the benign reception of these two miserable books? It is, I believe, bound up with the predominance, for more than a quarter century, of truly reactionary modes of thought, associated with post-modernism, which repudiate the very concept of objective truth. In the course of this review essay, I have referred several times to E. H. Carr, and I will do so again. Nearly a half-century ago, he warned against the infiltration into history of the Nietzschean principle, formulated in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "The falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it..." [111] The contemporary repudiation of objective truth, supported by the claim that the only issue is the internal coherence of a narrative, which is to be judged on its own terms, is inimical to serious scholarly work, or even to rational thought. It encourages a climate where "anything goes," where falsification flourishes, where there is no protest when lies are told about history.

And what does this mean? I began this essay with a review of the Moscow Trials and Stalin's Terror. I explained that what started with historical falsification ended with mass murder. That process is repeating itself in our own time. Whoever wishes to consider the implications and consequences of historical lies has only to consider the lies that were employed to prepare public opinion for the war in Iraq. "Weapons of mass destruction" was a lie that has already led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

A new generation now confronts immense and life-threatening problems. Everywhere it faces crisis and decay. The very future of the planet is in question if answers are not found to the crisis of the world capitalist system. The study of history must play a central role in the discovery of those answers required by humanity in the twenty-first century. But how can history be

studied if its record is falsified? The working people and youth of the world need truth, and the struggle to discover and defend it is the intellectual driving force of human progress.

Endnotes:

[1] "Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 7 (Nov. 2002), p. 1162. [return]

[2] Material relating to the work of the Collegium is based on "Mass Terror and the Court: The Military Collegium of the USSR," by Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4, June 2006, pp. 589-602.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 591.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, 593.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 595.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 596.

[8] *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (Oak Park, 1998), pp. xii-xiii.

[9] *The Stalin School of Falsification* (London, 1974), p. ix.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

[11] For example, at the first Moscow Trial, the defendant Holtzman testified that he had been sent as a courier to Copenhagen in 1932, where he supposedly met Trotsky's son Leon Sedov at the Hotel Bristol and received from him seditious anti-Soviet instructions. It soon emerged that Copenhagen's Hotel Bristol had burned down in a fire fifteen years earlier, in 1917. The crucial conspiratorial meeting could not have taken place. At the second trial, the Old Bolshevik and former Left Oppositionist Yuri Pyatakov testified that while in Berlin in December 1935 on Soviet business, he had secretly flown to Oslo. Pyatakov claimed to have been driven to Trotsky's home. Once there, Pyatakov — reciting a script that had been written by the NKVD interrogators — testified that Trotsky informed him of his [Trotsky's] links to the intelligence agencies of Nazi Germany. Pyatakov then confessed that he agreed to join Trotsky's anti-Soviet and pro-Nazi conspiracy. But even before the trial was over, Pyatakov's testimony was blown to pieces. The Norwegian press reported that no foreign plane had landed in Oslo's airport between September 1935 and May 1936! Pyatakov's story, which was absolutely central to the entire Stalinist frame-up, was exposed as a brazen concoction.

[12] *Socialism in One Country*, Volume One (New York, 1958), p. 152

[13] *The Prophet Unarmed* (London, 1959), p. v.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Trotsky* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973), p. 1.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 1- 2.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] A review of this volume by an academic journal, *The History Teacher*, substantiates this appraisal of its target audience:

"In regard to teaching and classroom use, this edition should find considerable acceptance. Unlike others in the series, this work does not promise to lose its readers in a host of overquotations from its figure's philosophical or political expositions. It succinctly describes Trotsky's achievements and provides the reader with the varying historical interpretations of his career.

"A worthy instructor of any modern Russian course should be able to make effective use of the text by utilizing the relatively short selections as jumping off points for further examination of their author's full theses. The casual student will undoubtedly enjoy it for its brevity — only 170 pages. More importantly, however, will be the use that the real student of Russian history can obtain from it. Stimulated by its content but disappointed by its brevity, he will hopefully delve more deeply into the actual diaries, autobiographies, and biographies that exist concerning Leon Trotsky. The success of any edited text in this series ought to be measured by the number of students who do just that." Volume 7, No. 2 (February 1974), pp. 291-92.

[20] That was not all. Gorbachev continued:

"Trotsky and the Trotskyites negated the possibility of building socialism in conditions of capitalist encirclement. In foreign policy they gave priority to export of revolution, and in home policy to tightening the screws on the peasants, to the city exploiting the countryside, and to administrative and military fiat in running society.

"Trotskyism was a political current whose ideologists took cover behind leftist pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric, and who in effect assumed a defeatist posture. This was essentially an attack on Leninism all down the line. The matter practically concerned the future of socialism in our country, the fate of the revolution.

"In the circumstances, it was essential to disprove Trotskyism before the whole people, and denude its antisocialist essence. The situation was complicated by the fact that the Trotskyites were acting in common with the new opposition headed by Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev. Being aware that they constituted a minority, the opposition leaders had again and again saddled the party with discussions, counting on a split in its ranks.

"But in the final analysis, the party spoke out for the line of the Central Committee and against the opposition, which was soon ideologically and organizationally crushed.

"In short, the party's leading nucleus, headed by Josef Stalin, had safeguarded Leninism in an ideological struggle. It defined the strategy and tactics in the initial stage of socialist construction, with its political course being approved by most members of the party and most working people. An important part in defeating Trotskyism ideologically was played by Nikolai Bukharin, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, Sergei Kirov, Grigory Ordzhonikidze, Jan Rudzutak and others." (*New York Times*, November 3, 1987)[83] Thatcher, p. 151.

[21] *Trotsky*, by Geoffrey Swain (UK, 2006), p. 1. Hereafter referred to as Swain.

[22] *Trotsky*, by Ian D. Thatcher (London and New York, 2003), p. i. Hereafter referred to as Thatcher.

[23] Swain, p. 1.

[24] Thatcher, pp. 15-16.

[25] Thatcher claims that "Deutscher simply puts thoughts into his subjects' heads for which there is no evidence," and he cites a passage "which [writes Thatcher] compares the disputes among the Bolsheviks over the peace with Germany with a dilemma faced by the Paris Commune over whether to wage a revolutionary war, and if so against whom..." Thatcher then presents the passage to which he objects:

"Trotsky, who so often looked at the Russian Revolution through the prism of the French, must have been aware of this

analogy. ... He must have seen himself as acting a role potentially reminiscent of Danton's, while Lenin's part was similar to Robespierre's. It was as if the shadow of the guillotine had for a moment interposed itself between him and Lenin. ... This consideration was decisive in Trotsky's eyes. In order to banish the shadow of the guillotine he made an extraordinary sacrifice of principle and personal ambition."

When one contrasts Thatcher's citation to the original passage as it appears in Deutscher's biography, it is immediately clear that the accusation of fictionalizing is entirely inappropriate. As Deutscher made very clear, he was using an analogy to clarify a complex political dispute. His recreation of what Trotsky might have been thinking in that situation — his conflict with Lenin over whether Soviet Russia should accept German terms at Brest Litovsk — is well within the bounds of historical writing, particularly as Deutscher has made clear that there is an element of speculation on his part. Those passages left out by Thatcher are presented in italics:

"Some analogy to the situation which was likely to occur if Trotsky had acted otherwise may be found in the three-cornered struggle that developed between the Commune of Paris, Danton and Robespierre during the French Revolution. In 1793 the Commune (and Anacharsis Cloots) stood, as Bukharin and the Left Communists were to do, for war against all the anti-revolutionary governments of Europe. Danton advocated war against Prussia and agreement with England, where he hoped that Fox would replace Pitt in office. Robespierre urged the Convention to wage war against England; and he strove for an agreement with Prussia. Danton and Robespierre joined hands against the Commune, but, after they suppressed it they fell out. The guillotine settled their controversy.

"Trotsky, who so often looked at the Russian Revolution through the prism of the French, must have been aware of this analogy. He may have remembered Engels's remarkable letter to Victor Adler, explaining all the 'pulsations' of the French Revolution by the fortunes of war and the disagreements engendered by it. He must have seen himself as acting a role potentially reminiscent of Danton's, while Lenin's part was similar to Robespierre's. It was as if the shadow of the guillotine had for a moment interposed itself between him and Lenin. This is not to say that if the conflict had developed, Trotsky, like Danton, would necessarily have played a losing game; or that Lenin was, like Robespierre, inclined to settle by the guillotine an inner party controversy. Here the analogy ceases to apply. It was evident that the war party, if it won, would be driven to suppress its opponents — otherwise it could not cope with its task. A peaceable solution to the crisis in the party was possible only under the rule of the adherents of peace, who could better afford to tolerate opposition. This consideration was decisive in Trotsky's eyes. In order to banish the shadow of the guillotine he made an extraordinary sacrifice of principle and personal ambition." (The Prophet Unarmed (London, 1954), pp. 390-91.

[26] Swain, p. 1.

[27] Swain, pp. 1-2.

[28] Professor James White has taught for many years at the University of Glasgow and has been a major influence on Thatcher. White has devoted considerable effort to rehabilitating Stalin and discrediting Trotsky. In his zeal to belittle Trotsky, White has at times appeared to play the clown — as with his claim, in a notorious article published in his short-lived *Journal of Trotsky*

Studies (co-edited with Ian Thatcher), that on the deciding night of the October 1917 insurrection, Trotsky did nothing of importance. "Thus while other members of the Military Revolutionary Committee went off to engage in some kind of revolutionary action, Trotsky was left behind with Kamenev — who had opposed the insurrection — to answer the telephone." [Volume 1, 1993, p. 18] That is how Professor White described the work of the principal strategist and leader of the insurrection.

White has also insisted, in defiance of well-established historical fact, that Stalin's political line toward the Provisional Government in March 1917 more or less coincided with that fought for by Lenin upon his return to Russia in April. As for the specific matter of the Lenin-Trotsky relationship in 1917, it has long been known — indeed, Trotsky wrote about it in his autobiography in 1929 — that there were differences between the two principal leaders of the Bolshevik Party on the execution of the insurrection. The differences related to tactics, not "vision."

[29] http://www.nlpvf.nl/docs/VanRee_WorldRevolution_screen.pdf, p. 25.

[30] To deal appropriately with Day's argument would require a detailed examination. His thesis does not lend itself to a careless one-line summary. At no time does Day suggest that there existed any similarity between "socialism in one country" as that term found expression in Stalin's program and Trotsky's acceptance of the possibility of initiating socialist construction within the USSR, as long as that construction recognized the necessity of contact with the world market and a correct international revolutionary policy. Day describes Stalin's efforts to present his arguments in defense of economic nationalism as "utter nonsense" that found acceptance in a demoralized political environment in which "the party wished to be deceived." Day observes that Stalin's "clever marshalling of quotations allowed him to impart a degree of forensic sophistication to an argument which otherwise would have been dismissed as a contemptible fraud." [*Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 100-01.] This last sentence might serve as a fair description of Swain's procedure.

[31] This is not merely my subjective opinion. After reading Swain's false presentation of the matter, I contacted Professor Day in Canada and brought this matter to his attention. In an e-mail letter written on March 13, 2007, I cited the relevant passage from Swain's biography, and asked Professor Day whether he was aware of it. I added that the citation from Swain "strikes me as a rather crass misrepresentation of your argument in *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. As I understand, you considered the decisive question in the inner-party struggle over economic policy to be whether socialism could be built in an isolated country. On this critical point, the position held by Trotsky — as you have consistently argued — was fundamentally opposed to the conceptions advanced by Preobrazhensky, not to mention Stalin."

I received on the same day a response from Professor Day, stating that "you are absolutely correct concerning my point of view." He then added, "There really has been so much interminable garbage written about Trotsky, and I am distressed to hear of another addition to the pile from Professor Swain. I truly cannot imagine how anyone could possibly say that Trotsky was not an 'internationalist' from beginning to end. It is a stunning

misreading of the historical record.”

[32] Swain, p. 2.

[33] Swain, p. 3.

[34] Swain, p. 3. Swain’s exclusion of Knei-Paz from his references reflects the essentially dishonest intentions of his [Swain’s] own work. Swain can find no useful purpose in the work of Knei-Paz, whose point of departure is the explicit acknowledgement that Trotsky was an important political thinker and a major figure in twentieth century European culture. For Knei-Paz, Trotsky was not only a “quintessential revolutionary in an age which has not lacked in revolutionary figures.” Trotsky’s “achievements in the realm of theory and ideas are in many ways no less prodigious: he was among the first to analyze the emergence, in the twentieth century, of social change in backward societies, and among the first, as well, to attempt to explain the political consequences which would almost inevitably grow out of such change. He wrote voluminously throughout his life, and the political thinker in him was no less an intrinsic part of his personality than the better-known man of action.” *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (London, 1978) pp. viii-ix

[35] Swain, p. 3.

[36] Trotsky did write many brilliant essays on the subject of dialectical materialist philosophy. But Swain says nothing about these works, nor does he evince the slightest interest in the philosophical method employed by Trotsky in his writings.

[37] *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927-1934 (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 477.

[38] While Swain at least credits Trotsky for the victory of the Red Army in the Civil War, his account fails to identify or analyze the elements of his military leadership that were critical to the victory of the revolutionary forces. For a serious study of Trotsky’s development as a military theorist and revolutionary general, the interested reader would be well-advised to consult the perceptive work of Col. Harold Walter Nelson, *Leon Trotsky and the Art of Insurrection* [London, 1988]. Writing as a military expert, Col. Nelson (who taught at the US Army War College) provides a thoroughly objective and professional account of Trotsky’s maturation as a significant figure in military history. Nelson concentrates on the period between 1905 and 1917, and Trotsky emerges in his account “as a genuine revolutionary general — one who can lead and coordinate decisive revolutionary action. He comes to understand the problems of armed conflict which the revolution must solve, he gains an appreciation of the resources which the revolution can call upon to solve these problems, he develops schemes for organizing these resources for maximum effectiveness, and he discerns the factors which motivate the men who must fight to gain the revolutionary victory.” (p. 4)

[39] Swain, p. 195.

[40] Swain, p. 160.

[41] London, 1976, p. 60.

[42] *The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1926-27* (New York, 1980), p. 106.

[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 130-164.

[44] Swain, p. 152.

[45] *The Interregnum* (London, 1954) p. 318.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 313.

[47] *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition*

in Soviet Russia (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), p. 223.

[48] Swain, p. 194.

[49] New York, 1982, p. 433.

[50] Thatcher, pp. 7-8.

[51] *The Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 244. Another excellent source for an objective presentation of the controversy sparked by *Lessons of October* is E. H. Carr’s *Socialism in One Country*, Volume 2 (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin, 1970), pp. 11-44.

[52] Thatcher, p. 35.

[53] Thatcher, predictably, tries to downplay the significance of the circulation figures by suggesting that the press run may have been greater than the actual readership. That is, of course, possible. But it is also possible that the readership, when copies that were passed around are considered, may have been greater than the press run.

[54] Thatcher, p. 35.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[57] London, 1967, pp. 60-61.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[59] *The Origins of Bolshevism*, New York, 1970, p. 345.

[60] Thatcher, p. 125. In reality, Trotsky never made such subjective claims of personal infallibility. And Thatcher does not produce a single citation in which Trotsky argued that “only his methods” would work.

[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26.

[62] The October 19, 1923 letter is included in the collection of documents published in *The Struggle for Power: Russia in 1923*, edited and translated by Valentina Vilкова. Although Thatcher frequently cites Vilкова, he does not list her work as a source for the October 19 letter, nor does he refer to her assessment of this document. Vilкова writes that the October 19 letter “is a vivid illustration of the methods used by the majority when carrying out the discussion. Most probably the document has been written by Stalin, since the argumentation and the style of presentation coincided with that of the speech of the General Secretary at the October Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee. The letter contained seriously strained interpretations, sheer lies, and the falsification of both the historical facts and the appraisal of the situation in the Party and in the country as a whole” (New York: Prometheus Press, 1996) p. 28.

[63] London, 1969, p. 307.

[64] Thatcher, p. 127.

[65] Gregor, p. 221.

[66] In his general introduction to the entire volume, Gregor bitterly denounces Lenin in terms redolent of Cold War anti-communist ideologues. He argues that Stalinism was the logical outcome of Lenin’s personal intolerance and political doctrine.

“Lenin was the mentor and Stalin the pupil who carried his master’s legacy to its logical conclusion. The pages of history are full of accounts of atrocities committed in the name of high principle. The two bolshevik leaders were no exception. As difficult as it may be, to accept it, both, in their own ways, wished to serve what they regarded as the most worthy cause; and there lies one of the ironies of history, for there are no men more dangerous and ruthless than those who ‘know’ how to save mankind” (p. 38).

[67] Thatcher, p. 128.

[68] In a relevant passage, Trotsky stated, “The English have a proverb: My country right or wrong. We can say with much greater historical justification: Whether it is right or wrong at any particular moment, this is my party. And although some comrades may think I was wrong in raising this or that point; although some comrades may think I have incorrectly described this or that danger; I for my part believe that I am only fulfilling my duty as a party member who warns his party about what he considers to be a danger.” For the full text of Trotsky’s speech, see *The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1923-25* (New York, 1975), pp. 161-80. The citation presented here appears on page 179.

[69] *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 36 (Moscow, 1966), p. 595.

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 594-95.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 596.

[72] Thatcher, p. 131.

[73] *Lenin: A Political Life*, Volume 3 (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995), pp. 273-74.

[74] *Ibid.*, p. 285.

[75] Thatcher, p. 135.

[76] *Ibid.*, pp. 135-37.

[77] As explained very well by Professor S.A. Smith of the University of Essex, “From the 1880s a stratum of ‘conscious’ workers emerged, who rebelled against the poverty and degradation which surrounded them and who struggled to advance themselves through education. Modelling themselves on the radical intelligentsia, they identified themselves with the ideal of *kul’turnost’* which the intelligentsia represented. This concept of ‘culturedness’ connected ideas of growth of the individual to reflections on the evolution of society at large. On the one hand, it denoted inner cultivation, in the sense of intellectual development, refinement of manners and moral development: in short, the forging of a self worthy of man’s innate dignity and capable of commanding respect in others. On the other hand, *kul’turnost’* was a sociological category used to evaluate the level of civilization achieved by a particular society along an evolutionary spectrum. In this respect, Russia was characterized precisely by its lack of *kul’turnost’*, perceived as lying closer to *Asiatic’* barbarism than to western-European civilization.”

Smith continues, “For ‘conscious’ workers, a crucial element in the acquisition of *kul’turnost’* was the repudiation of swearing. Like the intelligentsia, these workers saw the ubiquity of swearing as a symptom of the lack of culture that enslaved Russian society. At the individual level, swearing was a sign of the underdevelopment of *lichnost’*, that inner sense of personal dignity and worth as a human being, and a sign of lack of respect for others. And learning to regulate speech (and emotions) was seen as vital to achieving the intellectual and moral self-activity that was at the heart of *kul’turnost’*. By extension, the capacity to control speech indicated an individual’s potential to exercise control over wider aspects of working life and, ultimately, over society as a whole. At the social level, the widespread use of *mat* [swearing] among workers was, for the conscious minority, a depressing reminder of the political backwardness of the working class” (The Social Meanings of Swearing: Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia,” *Past and Present*, No. 160. (August 1998), pp. 177-79.

[78] Professor Smith writes that “during the Stalin era, it became acceptable for the new breed of official to use *mat*.” (*Ibid.*,

p. 200)

[79] Thatcher, p. 137.

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[81] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[82] Thatcher fails to indicate who that female candidate might have been. So as not to permit even this point to go entirely unanswered, I will cite a brief passage from *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman*, by Alexandra Kollontai, a leading female member of the Bolshevik Party. After the revolution she assumed the leadership of the Coordinating Office for Work Among Women. In relation to this assignment, Kollontai wrote, “The law liberalizing abortion was put through and a number of regulations of benefit to women were introduced by our Coordinating Office and legally confirmed. ... Our work received the wholehearted support from Lenin. And Trotsky, although he was overburdened with military tasks, unfailingly and gladly appeared at our conferences” (New York, 1971), p. 42. This comment was written in 1926. By that time, it was no longer politic to praise Trotsky. This fact invests Kollontai’s words with probative value.

[84] Thatcher, p. 156.

[85] Thatcher, pp. 179-81.

[86] The argument that Hitler’s victory was in any sense inevitable is not made by any serious contemporary historian. Indeed, emphasis has generally been placed on the extremely contingent character of Hitler’s accession to power. As Ian Kershaw, the author of a widely-respected two volume biography of Hitler, has written, “There was no inevitability about Hitler’s accession to power. Had Hindenburg been prepared to grant to Schleicher the dissolution that he had readily allowed Papen, and to prorogue the Reichstag for a period beyond the constitutional sixty days, a Hitler Chancellorship might have been avoided. With the corner turning of the economic Depression, and with the Nazi movement facing potential break-up if power were not soon attained, the future — even if under an authoritarian government — would have been very different. Even as the cabinet argued outside Hindenburg’s door at eleven o’clock on 30 January, keeping the President waiting, there was a possibility that a Hitler Chancellorship might not materialize. Hitler’s rise from humble beginnings to ‘seize’ power by ‘triumph of the will’ was the stuff of Nazi legend. In fact, political miscalculation by those with regular access to the corridors of power rather than any actions on the part of the Nazi leader played a larger role in placing him in the Chancellor’s seat” (*Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, New York, 1998), p. 424.

[87] Thatcher, p. 203.

[88] Carr wrote that “the seventh congress had brought into the open the deep-seated trend, long apparent to the discerning critic, to identify the aims of Comintern with the policies of the USSR; and, after the paradoxical success of the congress, the institution seemed to have lost its reality. It was significant that no further congress, and no major session of the IKKI [the executive body of the Comintern], was ever again summoned. Comintern continued to discharge subordinate functions, while the spotlight of publicity was directed elsewhere. Trotsky’s verdict that the seventh congress would ‘pass into history as the liquidation congress’ of Comintern was not altogether unfair. The seventh congress pointed the way to the *dénouement* of 1943 [the

formal dissolution of the Communist International” (*Twilight of the Comintern*, 1930-35, New York, 1982), p. 427.

[89] Thatcher, p. 204

[90] *The Comintern and the GPU* is published in the volume *Stalin's Gangsters*, by Leon Trotsky, published in London by New Park in 1977. The late Harold Robins (1908-1987), who served as the captain of Trotsky's guard in Coyoacan in 1939-40, advised the publishers that Trotsky had suggested this title for a collection of articles on the activities of the GPU.

[91] Thatcher, p. 206.

[92] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34* (New York, 1975), p. 259.

[93] Thatcher, p. 234.

[94] The article referred to by Thatcher is “Stalin in June 1941: A Comment on Cynthia Roberts,” by Steven J. Main, in *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 48, No. 5 (July 1996), pp. 837-39. Professor Main's comment was in reply to Cynthia Roberts' “Planning for War: The Red Army and the Catastrophe of 1941,” in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 8 (December 1995), pp. 1293-1326.

[95] Declaring an intensely controversial historical issue settled is one of Thatcher's favorite rhetorical tricks. He locates an article that supports his opinion and then proclaims it to be “convincing.” Of course, many experts remain unconvinced. For example, on the matter of Stalin's responsibility for the catastrophe of 1941, David E. Murphy writes: “Stalin's personal responsibility for the monumental losses of the war years, particularly those suffered in the first tragic months of the war, cannot be minimized or denied” (*What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa*, New Haven and London: 2005), p. 247.

[96] “Anti-Semitic Devices,” January 30, 1937 (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37*, New York, 1978), p. 177.

[97] It would not be illegitimate for a biographer to explore the cultural, psychological and political implications of Trotsky's Jewish origins. Some earlier biographers have already attempted, though not with great success, to do so. But Thatcher shows no particular interest in this theme, and this makes his heavy-handed and factually-incorrect references to “the Bronsteins” especially odd and suspect.

[98] Thatcher, p. 197.

[99] Thatcher, *ibid.*

[100] *John Dewey, Volume 11: 1935-37*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 323.

[101] In remarks made upon the release of the Summary of Findings, John Dewey stated that “the members of the commission have been without exception appalled by the utterly discreditable character of the whole Moscow trial proceedings, at once flimsy and vicious.” [*Ibid.*, p. 324]

[102] The novelist Sir Walter Scott famously denounced it as the “bastard verdict.”

[103] Thatcher, p. 224.

[104] *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, tr. E.S. Haldane and Francis H. Simpson (London and New York, 1974), Volume One, p. 12.

[105] Thatcher, p. 215

[106] What Trotsky actually wrote, in a relevant passage, is the following: “Moreover, Marx expected that the Frenchman would begin the social revolution, the German continue it, and the English finish it; and as to the Russian, Marx left him far in the rear. But this conceptual order was upset by the facts. Whoever tries now mechanically to apply the universal historic conception of Marx to the particular case of the Soviet Union at the given stage of its development will be entangled at once in hopeless contradictions” (*The Revolution Betrayed*, Detroit, 1991), pp. 40-41.

[107] *The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1928-29* (New York, 1981), p. 349.

[108] Thatcher has also overlooked the speech delivered by Trotsky on November 14, 1922 at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. Trotsky directly addressed Marx's speculations about the possibility of a transition to socialism based on the peasant communes. He said: “In 1883 Marx, writing to Nicholas Danielson, one of the theoreticians of Russian populism (Narodnikism), that should the proletariat assume power in Europe before the Russian *obschina* (communal village agriculture) had been completely abolished by history then even this *obschina* could become one of the starting points for Communist development in Russia. And Marx was absolutely right.” [“The NEP and World Revolution,” in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. Two (London, 1974), p. 230]

[109] “Stalin and Stalinism: A Review Article,” in *Europe-Asia Studies* (Volume 56, No. 6, September 2004), p. 918.

[110] Alexander, p. 32.

[111] Cited in Carr, *What Is History?*, p. 27.