

Leon Trotsky, Soviet Historiography, and the Fate of Classical Marxism

By David North
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The American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) held its 2008 National Convention in Philadelphia on November 20-23. Over 600 panels presented papers or roundtable discussions covering more than 1,700 topics in history, economics, political science, literature, language, and film. The convention's exhibit hall displayed recently published material by about 50 publishers and organizations, including Mehring Books.

*A highlight at the convention was the panel on Friday afternoon devoted to "The Intellectual and Political Legacy of Leon Trotsky." Chaired by independent scholar Lars Lih, the panel presented papers by Baruch Knei-Paz of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site; and Vladimir Volkov, independent scholar from St. Petersburg. Attendance was good as 40 people listened attentively to the three papers. Knei-Paz offered a 30-year retrospective of his book, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*. North delivered a contrasting perspective, "Leon Trotsky, Soviet Historiography, and the Fate of Classical Marxism," which we present below in its entirety. Volkov gave an overview of "The Reception of Trotsky's Legacy in Russia from Perestroika to the Present."*

Discussion was lively during the time remaining in the two-hour session. One questioner focused on the continuing legacy of the October Revolution of 1917. Another raised the issue of how the history of the 20th century would have been different had Trotsky's policies predominated in the period after Lenin's death in 1924. Differing views were defended on the task of historians as alternatives are considered when examining complex historical issues.

While publishing North's paper today, we will provide further analysis of the issues raised at the conference in the coming days. Here is the text of North's paper as it was delivered on November 21.

More than 45 years have passed since the publication of the last volume of Isaac Deutscher's extraordinary biographical triptych of Leon Trotsky, *The Prophet Armed, Unarmed and Outcast*. It would be difficult to think of another biography that had so profound and far-reaching intellectual and political influence. When Deutscher began his project in the early 1950s, Trotsky had been dead for more than a decade. But his murderer, Joseph Stalin, remained very much alive in the Kremlin—the object of a worldwide campaign of public veneration, as disgusting as it was absurd, in which virtually every Communist party participated. Deutscher compared his task as a biographer to that of Thomas Carlyle, who had complained that his study of Cromwell had required that he "drag the Lord Protector from out of a mountain of dead dogs, a huge load of calumny and oblivion."^[1]

By the time Deutscher completed his third volume in 1963, the political environment had changed dramatically. Stalin died in March 1953. In February 1956, at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Khrushchev delivered his so-called "secret speech." He all but denounced Stalin as a political criminal, responsible for the imprisonment, torture and murder of

countless thousands of Old Bolsheviks and loyal communists during the purges of the 1930s. Of course, Khrushchev hardly acknowledged the full extent of Stalin's crimes. The indictment was as evasive as it was incomplete. But the impact of Khrushchev's speech was politically devastating. The unstated but inescapable conclusion that flowed from the exposure of Stalin's crimes was that the Moscow Trials of 1936-38 were a frame-up and that the Old Bolshevik defendants had been murdered. The thought that "Trotsky was right" haunted countless leaders and members of the CPSU and associated Stalinist parties throughout the world. And if Trotsky was right about the trials, what else had he been right about?

Amidst the turmoil that erupted inside the Stalinist parties—initiating a process of internal decomposition that led, within 30 years, to their political disintegration—Deutscher's trilogy assumed immense political significance. The discrediting of Stalin was, to a great extent, a vindication of Trotsky. In the climate of the time, the heroic image of Trotsky evoked by the metaphoric title of Deutscher's biography did not seem at all hyperbolic. Notwithstanding its significant limitations—especially in the final volume, in which Deutscher pursued rather obtrusively his own past political disputes with Trotsky—the three volumes introduced the heroic personality of the great revolutionary to a new generation of politically-radicalized intellectuals and youth. And what a personality it was! What other figure in modern history exhibited such a vast repertoire of intellectual, political, literary, and martial skills? Deutscher succeeded in imparting to his narrative an immense dramatic tension. But the drama of Trotsky's life did not have to be invented, nor did it require artistic exaggeration. His life was, after all, the concentrated expression of the vast historical drama and tragedy of the Russian Revolution.

By the 1960s, the Soviet Union had lost its claim on the imagination of intellectuals and students. Deutscher's biography served as an introduction to the old disputes of the 1920s, in which the work of Trotsky had loomed so large. So many of Deutscher's readers then made their way to a study of Trotsky's writings, which gradually became more widely available.

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, interest in the life and work of Trotsky was intense. In 1978, on the eve of his centenary, Professor Baruch Knei-Paz's *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* was published. Knei-Paz's approach to his subject, however critical, reflected the predominant sentiment among Soviet scholars that Trotsky was an important political and *intellectual* presence. Knei-Paz noted that Trotsky "is, even now, and perhaps not unjustly, considered to be the quintessential revolutionary in an age which has not lacked in revolutionary figures." He described Trotsky's achievements "in the realm of theory and ideas" as "prodigious." Trotsky, he wrote, "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 grow out of

such change.”[2] As a Marxist and an adherent of Trotsky’s political conceptions, there are many elements of Professor Knei-Paz’s analysis and interpretation with which I respectfully disagree. But his meticulous scholarship certainly demonstrated that Trotsky’s life provides fertile ground for serious research. Though Trotsky was a man of action par excellence, he was also an outstanding thinker. Knei-Paz estimated that Trotsky’s writings, if brought together in a single edition, would “easily fill ... sixty to seventy thick volumes—without including the vast material contained in the Trotsky archives at Harvard University.”[3]

Professor Knei-Paz set himself definite limits—a necessity for any scholar attempting to tackle a subject as vast and complex as Trotsky’s life and times. He explained that his work was “a study of Trotsky’s own thought, not that of his opponents or followers, nor of the ideological and political movement which came to be identified with his name.”[4] Even with this disciplined focus, Professor Knei-Paz required 598 pages of the Clarendon Press’s compact typography to complete his assignment. But he still left the scholarly community with not only a great deal to argue about, but also a great deal to do.

And yet, Knei-Paz’s book turned out to be almost the last really significant academic contribution to the field of Trotsky studies. That this would be the case would have been hard to foresee in 1978. Knei-Paz’s book was, after all, published on the very eve of an event that should have encouraged Trotsky scholarship—the opening on January 2, 1980 of the previously closed section of the Trotsky Archive at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Until then, Isaac Deutscher, with the special permission of Trotsky’s widow, Natalia Sedova, had been the only writer to gain access to this vast collection of the revolutionary’s private papers. But as it turned out, the opening of this archive had only marginal impact on American and British researchers in the field of Soviet history. During the past 28 years, very little material from this vast archive has found its way into published academic work.

This drying up of Trotsky scholarship after 1978 is a curious phenomenon. After all, the deepening crisis of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe throughout the 1980s certainly justified a more intensive review of the work of Trotsky, who, after all, had been the foremost critic of Stalin and Stalinism, and who had foreseen the demise of the USSR. As a matter of fact, Trotsky’s depiction, in *The Revolution Betrayed* (published in 1936), of the process of capitalist restoration anticipated, with astonishing accuracy, the economic transformation of the former USSR under the auspices of Yeltsin in the early 1990s. However, in most English-language works dealing with the history, economics, politics and social structure of the Soviet Union, Trotsky appears as a minor, and even marginal figure. The only notable and original contribution to Trotsky studies that appeared in the 1980s—such a tumultuous decade in Soviet history—was a small monograph, entitled *Leon Trotsky and the Art of Insurrection*, that focused on Trotsky’s achievements as a military strategist. Surprisingly, this highly favorable assessment of Trotsky’s contributions in the art and science of war, insurrection and military command was authored by an officer and professor at the US Army War College, Col. Harold Wilson.

If anything, the situation in Trotsky studies deteriorated in the 1990s. American and British scholarship produced nothing substantial in this field during the entire decade. The only published work that perhaps stands out as an exception, though a minor one, is a single volume of essays, produced by the Edinburgh University Press in 1992 under the title *The Trotsky Reappraisal*. During this decade, a disturbing trend emerged in Britain, which consisted of recycling and legitimizing old anti-Trotsky slanders. This trend was exemplified by the so-called *Journal of Trotsky Studies*, which was produced at the University of Glasgow. The favorite theme of this journal was that Trotsky’s writings were full of self-serving distortions. This claim was repeatedly made without any respect for the factual record. Among its more absurd

contributions was an article that set out to prove that Trotsky, in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, had vastly exaggerated his own role in the October insurrection. It informed us that while serious revolutionaries like Stalin went out into the streets to do the heavy lifting, a somewhat befuddled Trotsky was left behind in the Smolny Institute to answer the phones. Mercifully, this journal expired after four issues.

The current decade has seen no improvement. Two new Trotsky biographies were published, the first in 2003 and the second in 2006, by Professors Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain. These works contained no new research, and I have already provided a detailed analysis of their work in an extended review, entitled *Leon Trotsky and the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification*. [5]

It is worth contrasting the prevailing treatment of Trotsky to the massive volume of material on Stalin. He seems to exert a never-ending fascination on historians. Of course, Stalin, no less than Hitler, is a legitimate subject of scholarly research. There are no appropriate or inappropriate subjects for historical study. But, as Wilde might have suggested, the one unconditional requirement for the writing of history, like for the writing of novels, is that it should be done well. The problem is that much of the writing on Stalin is done badly. Many of the works are crassly journalistic, exploiting in a sensationalist manner material acquired from the Soviet archives. Works by Radzinsky and Sebag Montefiore provide examples of this genre. More troubling, however, are studies by scholars that seem genuinely anxious to rehabilitate Stalin and Stalinism. At times, the conclusions arrived at by such historians are truly bizarre. For example, Professor Stephen Kotkin, in his book *Magnetic Mountain*, argues that Stalinism was the culmination of the Enlightenment project. Stalinism, he writes:

... constituted a quintessential Enlightenment utopia, an attempt, via the instrumentality of the state, to impose a rational ordering of society, while at the same time overcoming the wrenching class divisions brought about by nineteenth century industrialization. That attempt, in turn, was rooted in a tradition of urban-modeled, socially-oriented utopias that helped make the Enlightenment possible. Magnitogorsk had very deep roots.[6]

At its worst, this tendency, in the guise of providing more “nuanced” appreciations of historical events, advances weird justifications of Stalin and his crimes. Along these lines, in Robert W. Thurston’s *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia 1934-1941*, published by the Yale University Press in 1996, we are offered this appraisal of Stalin’s prosecutor, Andrei Vyshinskii:

Thus, in 1935-36, despite his appalling role in the show trials that began in August 1936, Vyshinskii advocated major improvements in legal procedures. Simultaneously, he scorned key NKVD practices and urged much greater tolerance of ordinary citizens’ criticisms, so long as they did not touch fundamental policy.[7]

And, referring to Kamenev, Zinoviev and other defendants in the 1936 trial, Thurston offers this thinly-concealed legitimization of their condemnation by Stalin:

Probably guilty of nothing more than talking about political changes, these men, according to Western standards of justice, did not deserve punishment. But they had engaged in opposition, had

had contacts with Trotsky and leaked secret documents to the West, and had wanted to remove Stalin, all of which they had lied about, while proclaiming their complete loyalty. These points provided material for Stalin's suspicious mind. Why were such people lying? How many more like them existed, and what were their real intentions? Given the Trotsky bloc and the language of the Riutin Memorandum, it might have been easy for people less morbid than Stalin to visualize terrorism at work in some of the many industrial accidents of the period. He embellished matters considerably and told massive lies of his own—but the evidence just given suggests that at this point he took steps to eliminate people who had misled him and conspired with an archenemy, Trotsky. This decision, though unjust, was not part of a plan to create political terror.[8]

While the Stalin industry seems to be a going concern in the field of Soviet scholarship, the protracted depression in Trotsky studies continues. This finds expression not only in the very limited and generally poor quality of research into Trotsky's life, but also in the absence of significant work on his political comrades in the Left Opposition. How many of the leaders of the Left Opposition, beginning with Christian Rakovsky and Adolph Joffe, have been the subject of full-length English-language biographies? What work has been done on Smirnov, Smilga, Bogoslavskii, Ter-Vaganian, and Voronskii? There has not been, as yet, any comprehensive study of the Left Opposition and its activities. A persistent theme of many contemporary works on the Great Terror is that it had little to do with Trotsky, who by the 1930s, it is claimed, was without any influence within the Soviet Union. But is this really true? What research has been conducted into the activities of Oppositionists? And even if Stalin's repression made systematic agitation impossible, is it really the case that the Trotskyist *Biulletin of the Left Opposition* exercised no influence on the thinking of disaffected elements within the Soviet state and party apparatus? Moreover, had all recollection of Trotsky among Civil War veterans of the Red Army, within the officer corps and among rank-and-file soldiers, vanished by 1936? Was Victor Serge simply exercising his artistic license when he wrote of Trotsky, in 1937, that within the Soviet Union, "Everyone thinks of him, since it is forbidden to think of him ... As long as the Old Man lives, there will be no security for the triumphant bureaucracy." [9] These questions cannot be answered until the necessary research is carried out.

But why has this work not been done? This is a complex question which, I suspect, will, itself, at some point become a subject for students of intellectual history. I will not claim to have the definitive answer, but I would like to point to several factors that may have affected the perception and reception of Trotsky in the academic and scholarly community. Let me state from the outset that references to Trotsky's political "irrelevance" are neither credible nor serious. Trotsky, quite clearly, played a decisive role in the Russian Revolution, one of the key events of the 20th century. He was also, as it so happens, one of this century's most brilliant literary figures. Walter Benjamin noted in his diary that Bertolt Brecht in 1931 "maintained that there were good reasons for thinking that Trotsky was the greatest living European writer." [10] With these qualifications it should hardly be necessary to justify "another book" about Trotsky. One might also, for good measure, add that Trotsky's political and intellectual legacy, however controversial and contested, continues to exert influence on contemporary politics. Trotsky is, quite obviously, not irrelevant for history. Why, then, has he become irrelevant for historians?

The conservative political and intellectual climate that has prevailed for nearly three decades has been a substantial factor in determining the reception of Trotsky in the scholarly community. Supreme Court justices take note of the election returns and historians read the newspapers. As

Trotsky aptly observed in 1938, the force of political reaction not only conquers, it also convinces. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 brought in its wake a flood of embittered denunciations of the entire Soviet experience. The works of right-wing opponents of the socialist project like Martin Malia, Robert Conquest, the indefatigable Richard Pipes and Francois Furet (a former Stalinist) promoted an intellectually-stultifying environment that discouraged a serious, let alone sympathetic, investigation of the political heritage of Russian and European Marxism. It is difficult to imagine the classics of Soviet studies that date from the 1950s and 1960s—works like Leopold Haimson's *Origins of Bolshevism*, Samuel Baron's *Plekhanov*, or, for that matter, E.H. Carr's encyclopedic study of early Soviet history—being written in the 1990s. The prevailing intellectual climate was not congenial for those, like the Russian scholar Vadim Rogovin, who sought to explore, within the context of the Marxist and Bolshevik tradition, revolutionary socialist alternatives to Stalinism.

However, not all the problems relating to the academic reception of Trotsky flow directly from the political environment of the last 30 years. There are other long-term intellectual tendencies at work, which substantially predate the elections of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. I am referring to a protracted process, spanning many decades, of a steadily deepening alienation of substantial sections of left intellectuals from the theoretical framework and political outlook associated with the "classical Marxism" of which Leon Trotsky was among the most outstanding and, certainly, the last great representative.

It is not possible at this time to offer an exposition of Trotsky's philosophical worldview and his conception of politics and human culture. But it must be said, for the sake of the argument being presented here, that crucial elements of this world view included an irreconcilable commitment to philosophical materialism, belief in the law-governed character of the historical process, confidence in the power of human reason (to the extent that this faculty is understood materialistically) and its ability to discover *objective* truth, and, associated with this, belief in the progressive role of science. Trotsky was a determinist, an optimist, and an internationalist, convinced that the socialist revolution arose necessarily out of the insoluble contradictions of the world capitalist system. Above all, he insisted that there existed a revolutionary force within society, the working class, that would overthrow the capitalist system and lay the foundations for world socialism.

None of these elements of the outlook of classical Marxism—least of all, its optimism—has survived within any significant section of the left intelligentsia. Even by the 1920s, the shattering impact of World War I, the collapse of the Second International, and, somewhat later, in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the political defeats suffered by the working class in Central and Western Europe, undermined confidence in the Marxist outlook and perspective among substantial sections of the left petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. As early as 1926, Hendrick de Man's frontal assault on Marxism, *The Psychology of Socialism*, gave voice to the growing skepticism among left intellectuals in the materialist explanation of the development of political consciousness and in the efficacy of Marxist political practice. Marxism's confidence in the revolutionary effect of objective socioeconomic processes on mass working-class consciousness, de Man argued, was misplaced. The rationally-grounded appeals of Marxists to objective class interests were inadequate as a means of winning the working class to socialism. Many of the arguments advanced by de Man subsequently found their way into the writings of the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School.

The victory of Hitler in 1933, the Moscow Trials, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution and, finally, the Stalin-Hitler Pact completed the political demoralization of the left intelligentsia. The basic perspective of socialism, they believed, had been discredited. The working class had failed. There existed no revolutionary subject in contemporary society.

Trotsky, in one of his last major essays, grasped the implications of such arguments: "If we grant as true that the cause of the defeats is rooted in the social qualities of the proletariat itself then the position of modern society will have to be acknowledged as hopeless." [11] Just seven years later, in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno arrived at precisely this conclusion.

It does not seem an exaggeration to state that the intelligentsia was overwhelmed and exhausted by the tragedies of the 20th century: the two world wars, fascism, the Stalinist betrayal of socialism, and the protracted paralysis of the workers movement beneath the weight of bureaucracy. Pessimism gave way to cynicism and complacency. Paradoxically, overcoming the intellectual demoralization would have required systematic research into the causes of past defeats, and this demanded, in turn, engagement with the ideas of Trotsky and the great school of classical Marxism. But objective conditions, embedded in the long post-World War II economic expansion of capitalism, worked against such an engagement.

What, then, are the prospects now for a re-engagement with Trotsky's ideas? In formulating an answer to this question, I think it best to employ the same approach taken by Trotsky himself. He insisted on understanding the vicissitudes of his own life within the context of the development of the socialist revolution, within Russia, Europe and the world as a whole. In assessing the shifts in his own fortunes, Trotsky stated that he did not see personal tragedy, but, rather, different stages in the contradictory unfolding of the world socialist revolution. The rise of the revolutionary wave carried Trotsky into power. Its ebb drove him into exile.

It has been many decades since Marxism, as Trotsky would have understood that term, has played any significant role in the life of the working class. But those were decades of capitalist economic stability and substantial growth. The class struggle, to the extent that it manifested itself at all, was kept within traditional channels, under the police supervision of the labor bureaucracies. Now, however, it appears that history has quite suddenly taken one of its surprising turns. The world in which we are meeting today already appears very different from that which existed when the AAASS met last year in New Orleans. Over the past few weeks, references to the Great Depression of the 1930s have become commonplace. It has been acknowledged, even by the president of the United States, that the unfolding crisis has brought American and world capitalism to the brink of collapse.

It is not difficult to imagine that this is a crisis that Leon Trotsky, who coined the phrase, "The Death Agony of Capitalism," would have understood very well. The old "catastrophe" theory which so many anti-Marxists have had a good laugh over no longer seems so funny, let alone outlandish.

Social being does, in the final analysis, determine social consciousness. If, as seems very likely, the deepening crisis compels on the part of historians a reexamination of long-standing and discredited assumptions, and, with it, a more critical attitude toward the existing forms of society, then I suspect that we will soon be witnessing a renewal of intense scholarly interest in the life and work of Leon Trotsky.

Notes:

1. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed* (London: Verso, 2003), p. vii.
2. Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. viii.
3. *Ibid*, p. xi.
4. *Ibid*, p. xiii.
5. David North, *Leon Trotsky and the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification* (Mehring Books (Oak Park, 2007).
6. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain* (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1995), p. 364.

7. Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia 1934-1941*, p. 9.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.
9. Victor Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), p. 109.
10. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 477.
11. Leon Trotsky, "The USSR in War," from *In Defence of Marxism* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 15.

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