

A letter from Professor Geoffrey Swain and a reply by David North

19 May 2007

The World Socialist Web Site invited Professors Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain to reply to David North's critical review of their biographies of Leon Trotsky. (See "Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification: A review of two Trotsky biographies by Geoffrey Swain and Ian Thatcher") On May 10, the WSW received a letter from Professor Swain, which we post below along with a reply by North. No letter has been received from Ian Thatcher. Click here to download the letter and reply in PDF format.

Dear David North,

We are clearly not going to agree in our evaluation of Trotsky's place in history. Just one factual point you might like to correct. I joined Glasgow University last year, so I am not a long-term colleague of James White.

My purpose in writing a biography of Trotsky was not to fill the minds of the young with "intellectual disorienting absurdities" but simply to try and reconcile what seems to be the two different Trotskys — the critic of Lenin in the pre-1917 years and the "best Leninist" of the post-1917 years. This is a problem that has always worried me, and the invitation from Longman gave me the opportunity to think more about it, especially as they were keen for a book that fitted their "profiles in power" series and concentrated on Trotsky when he was at the peak of his power. The sources used reflect that. There is a great deal of archival material used for the chapter on the civil war, but what is held in the USA (and not duplicated here) mostly covers Trotsky's life in emigration.

Most of your criticisms concern the period of Trotsky's clash with Stalin. We see things very differently, but I do not agree that I frequently defend Stalin — all I try to do is to suggest that Thermidor was not a concept that was rooted in reality, and that this weakened Trotsky's position considerably.

You say little about my coverage of the period between the revolutions, the revolution itself, and the civil war. During all these periods I tried to portray Trotsky in a positive light, as the architect of the first successful socialist revolution in history, and the Russian social democrat, who more than any other, was able to build a rapport with working class militants.

Without Trotsky there would have been no October Revolution and no Bolshevik victory in the Russian civil war. That is what I wanted students to know and surely we can agree on that. We will probably never agree, although this was the view of most Bolsheviks, not just the Stalin clique, that in the 1920s elements of Trotsky's pre-1917 Menshevism weakened his challenge to the leadership.

Geoff Swain

Dear Professor Swain:

Thank you for your letter of May 10. Unfortunately, our differences

extend well beyond conflicting evaluations of Trotsky's place in history. My main criticism of your and Ian Thatcher's biographies of Leon Trotsky is that they misrepresent and distort well-documented facts. Your interpretation is developed on the basis of a serious misreading and even falsification of the historical record. My review cited as examples your claims that (a) Trotsky's belief in world revolution was "largely rhetorical"; (b) it was only "in exile in 1933 that internationalism actually became central to Trotsky's purpose"; (c) Trotsky agreed with Stalin about the possibility of building socialism in one country; (d) Trotsky "was always happy to write about subjects about which he knew very little"; and (e) Trotsky "had absolutely no understanding" of European politics. None of these statements, or the many others to which I might have drawn attention, is defensible on the basis of an examination of Trotsky's voluminous writings and the objective record of his political work.

Aside from clarifying the extent of your professional relationship with Professor James White of the University of Glasgow, you do not rebut my exposure of the serious errors in your book. Instead, you attempt to explain the concerns that determined your approach to the writing of the biography. You sought "to try and reconcile what seem to be two different Trotskys — the critic of Lenin in the pre-1917 years and the 'best Leninist' of the post-1917 years." Had you taken the time to study systematically his writings, both before and after 1917, you would have learned that there was *one* Trotsky. For all the vicissitudes of Trotsky's long political career, the theory of permanent revolution imparted to his work an extraordinary degree of programmatic consistency and continuity. The conception of world socialist revolution and the place of Russia within that historical process, which he elaborated in the period of the 1905 Revolution, remained the foundation of Trotsky's political activity until his assassination in 1940.

While you have been searching for the "two different Trotskys," you might just as well have looked for the "two different Lenins" — that is, the pre-1917 opponent of Trotsky who upheld his own theory of "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" and the later Lenin who in 1917 adopted the theory of permanent revolution, declared publicly that there was "no better Bolshevik" than Trotsky, and offered to his former adversary the leadership of the Soviet government (an honor that Trotsky declined). Of course, neither the political development of Lenin and Trotsky nor the complex relationship between them can be understood apart from the crucial questions of program and perspective that preoccupied both men prior to October 1917. Regrettably, your biography either ignores or distorts these issues. The end result is a presentation of history that hews closely, as I demonstrated in my review, to the falsified Stalinist version.

This tendency persists in your letter. You now write, for example, that “elements of Trotsky’s pre-1917 Menshevism weakened his challenge to the leadership.” On what is this statement based, if not the Stalinist falsification of Trotsky’s political biography? Trotsky was not a Menshevik. Except for a brief period in the immediate aftermath of the split at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in September 1903, Trotsky stood in opposition to both the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. The basis of Trotsky’s independent position was his conception of the driving forces and trajectory of the Russian revolutionary movement, which differed from that of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Trotsky’s political error, from the standpoint of Lenin, was that he sought to reconcile the opposing factions within the RSDLP. That is, he occupied a “centrist” position on the question of party organization. Later on, in the 1920s, the denunciation of Trotsky’s “Menshevism” by his factional opponents was a central element of their falsification of history. This falsification forms the foundation of your interpretation of Trotsky’s political career.

In the final chapter of your biography, we find the following passage: “In one of their last confrontations, at a meeting of the Comintern Executive on 27 September 1927, Stalin ended his speech by accusing Trotsky to his face: ‘You are a Menshevik! Was Trotsky ever a Bolshevik?’” And then you reply, “The case against Trotsky’s Bolshevism is convincing.” [page 214] Convincing to whom, Professor Swain? Certainly not to those who are familiar with the theoretical and programmatic foundations of Bolshevism. As far as it is possible to make out, you seem to conceive of Bolshevism in entirely abstract structural terms, devoid of political content, as an obsessively disciplined and super-centralized political organization. This essentially Stalinist and bureaucratic conception ignores the programmatic issues that defined Bolshevism and determined its varied organizational forms. The essential political issue that divided Bolshevism from Menshevism related to their conflicting appraisals of the liberal bourgeoisie in Russia. Lenin intransigently fought to establish the political independence of the working class from the liberal bourgeoisie, to whom the Mensheviks drew steadily closer after the 1905 Revolution. The outbreak of the World War in 1914 intensified this conflict as Menshevism, reflecting broader tendencies in European Social Democracy, allied itself with the liberal bourgeoisie in defense of the Russian state and its national and imperialist interests. When examined from the standpoint of program and the international crisis generated by war in all the parties of European Social Democracy, the underlying logic of the rapprochement of Lenin and Trotsky in 1917 emerges clearly. While the collapse of the Second International and the degeneration of Menshevism into an instrument of Russian imperialism compelled Trotsky to recognize the impossibility of political unity among international revolutionary and national reformist tendencies within the old RSDLP, Lenin recognized that only the perspective associated with the theory of permanent revolution provided an alternative to class collaboration with the bourgeois Provisional Government, the very policy espoused by Menshevism.

Indifferent to the national reformist and, therefore, anti-Trotskyist character of Menshevism as a political tendency, you quote Stalin’s provocative and cynical outburst against Trotsky in 1927 as if it were some sort of heroic riposte (“accusing Trotsky to his face...”), let alone a legitimate assessment of Trotsky’s politics. You fail to mention that by then the Stalinist bureaucracy had already purged the Third International (Comintern) of all independent political figures

and replaced them with a group of incompetent flunkeys. Nor did you note that Stalin’s own policies on both domestic and international questions (especially the Chinese Revolution) closely resembled positions identified with pre-October Menshevism. And finally, you neglect to point out that Stalin’s outburst occurred on the eve of the expulsion from the Russian Communist Party of not only Trotsky but scores of the most outstanding figures of the old Bolshevik Party (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Pyatakov, Preobrazhensky, Voronsky, Ter-Vaganian, and Smirnov, to name only a few). However you may protest, all this represents a defense of Stalin.

So, too, does your letter’s claim that “Thermidor was not a concept that was rooted in reality.” While Trotsky refined his use of this analogy — drawn from the experience of the French Revolution — over several years, Thermidor denoted a political break by the state regime — created originally by the revolution — to the right. Your dismissal of this concept can only mean that Trotsky’s characterization of the Stalinist regime as a product of a political reaction against the October Revolution, rooted in the international defeats of the working class (especially in Germany) and the protracted isolation of the USSR, was without foundation. In other words, Stalinism did not represent a turn to the right. Against what, then, was Trotsky fighting? Your biography provides no serious examination of this crucial question.

One final point: You state that the terms of your publisher’s “profiles in power” series required that you narrow the concentration of your book to those years when Trotsky held supreme power in Soviet Russia. Perhaps. But the power wielded by Trotsky rested far more on the force of his mind and ideas, than it did on the physical accoutrements of state power. Nearly 70 years after his death, Trotsky’s writings still command an international audience, and the revolutionary program and ideals associated with his name inspire socialist movements throughout the world. A biography of Trotsky should have explained the reason for this and examined with the necessary care the intellectual qualities that underlay this rare type of power.

David North
May 17, 2007

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