

# Assessing Leon Trotsky seventy years after his assassination

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By David North  
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The subject of this panel is a man who remains, even 70 years after his assassination by a Stalinist agent, a relentlessly contemporary figure. Trotsky was one of the titans of the political and intellectual life of the twentieth century. But the efforts to blackguard Trotsky, misrepresent his theoretical work, and manufacture false accounts of his life continue. Trotskyism remains as politically heretical in the twenty-first century as *Spinosisme* was in the eighteenth. Indeed, in recent years the hostility to Trotsky has grown more intense, and this hostility has assumed a particularly vicious character. We are, it must be said, very far from the time when principled liberal adversaries of Trotsky read his work with intense interest and even admiration. To the extent that liberalism retained a certain level of intellectual integrity and still believed sincerely in its democratic ideals, it was possible, in the 1930s, for a man such as John Dewey (though not, of course, for the liberal fellow travelers of the Soviet regime, such as the publishers of the *Nation*) to disagree with Trotsky while readily acknowledging his genius, courage and honesty. Not only that. Dewey felt obligated—on the basis of his principles—to provide Trotsky with the means to defend himself against the accusations of the Stalinists.

Later, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of historians sought to deal objectively and honestly with the October Revolution and its greatest figures, including Leon Trotsky. Alexander Rabinowitch, on the basis of meticulous archival research, established the decisive role played by Trotsky in the development of the strategy of the October insurrection and its tactical implementation. Richard B. Day investigated the economic thought of the Left Opposition. Baruch Knei-Paz produced a detailed examination of Trotsky's political and social thought. As it turned out, the publication of Knei-Paz's study in 1978 proved to be the high water mark in formal academic work on Leon Trotsky—excluding the efforts of Pierre Broué, who was not only an outstanding historian but also a Trotskyist.

The last 20 years have witnessed an anti-intellectual counter-revolution in the field of Soviet studies in general and, in particular, the study of Leon Trotsky. The initial cause of this reaction is not difficult to identify. The dissolution of the Soviet Union had a demoralizing effect on broad sections of the liberal intelligentsia in the United States and Western Europe. Whatever their individual political convictions, all the historians who did serious work on the Russian Revolution were motivated by the belief that October 1917 represented a major turning point in world history. Its origins, the event itself, its aftermath, and those who played an important role in this historical drama demanded conscientious study. The collapse of 1991 seemed to invalidate that fundamental belief. The era of bourgeois triumphalism and its house intellectual, Francis Fukuyama, had

arrived, courtesy of the RAND Corporation. The October Revolution, it was now proclaimed, was not only a political crime. It was a mistake, and a pointless one at that!

The very idea that the October Revolution posed even the possibility of a historically viable alternative to capitalism had been massively refuted.

This argument had a substantial impact on the academic community, whose confidence in human progress had already been undermined, even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, not only by the blather of the Reagan years but also by the subjectivism and irrationalism of the Frankfurt School and Post-Modernism. However, the effort to deny the substance and legitimacy of October 1917 rested from the start on very shaky historical and intellectual foundations. After all, the Soviet state, which arose out of the revolution, had survived not merely for 71 days, as in the case of the Paris Commune, but for 73 years. In the course of its existence, the Soviet Union had undergone an extraordinary industrial transformation, defeated Nazi Germany in war, vastly raised the living standards and cultural level of its people, recorded remarkable achievements in science, and exercised immense global influence. Moreover, the claim that the outcome of December 1991 was the inexorable product of October 1917 required that historians either belittle or ignore alternatives to the course of Soviet development under Stalin and his successors—alternatives that were not only imagined, but which were actually programmatically formulated and fought for. One particularly cynical example of this approach is to be found in the writings of British historian Eric Hobsbawm, a long-time member of the Stalinist British Communist Party, who justified Stalin's regime as "the only game in town."

Ironically, the claim by anti-Marxists that the final outcome of Soviet history followed inevitably from the 1917 Revolution—that the political and economic policies that were pursued from the early days of War Communism and the NEP through to collectivization, the Liberman reforms and Gorbachev's Perestroika represented the sole conceivable path of development—mirrored the arguments of the Stalinist regime, which sought to cloak its errors by depicting bureaucratic arbitrariness as an expression of "historical necessity." This perversion of a genuinely materialist and dialectical conception of Marxist determinism by Stalin was capably exposed by Professor Day in 1990 in his perceptive refutation of the "Blackmail of the Single Alternative."<sup>[1]</sup> Day's essay was written on the very eve of the definitive failure of Gorbachev's Perestroika, the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the USSR, and the restoration of capitalism.

As Day correctly noted: "When Stalin canonized 'Leninism' in the mid-1920s, he excluded from Lenin's thought every element of

sophistication and fastened on every plausible justification for the authoritarian organization of political and economic life.”[2] Significantly, Day linked his opposition to the “blackmail of the single alternative” (or Hobsbawm’s “only game in town”) to an examination of the alternative posed by Trotsky. Stressing the connection between Trotsky’s philosophical conceptions and his programmatic opposition to the nationalist line of socialism in one country, Day explained:

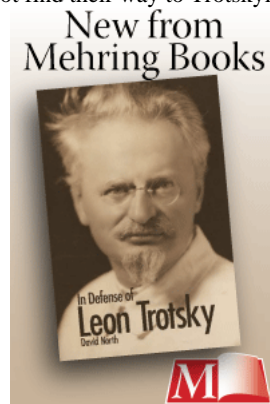
Trotsky looked upon historical contradictions as the material of social policy. Following the Hegelian and Marxist commitment to universality, he also believed that contradictions had to be comprehended within the “whole” of world economy, of which capitalism and socialism were now “parts.” With the emergence of the world market, the nation-state—whether capitalist or socialist—could no longer exist as “an independent economic arena.” The world division of labor was “not disrupted by the fact that a socialist system prevails in one country while a capitalist one prevails in the others.”[3]

In an environment shaped by post-Soviet capitalist triumphalism, few historians were prepared to develop historical work along the path suggested by Day and explore systematically historical alternatives to Stalinism. The one great exception to the prevailing pattern of intellectual prostration before the force of political and ideological reaction was the work of historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin in Russia, who entitled the first volume of his seven-volume history of the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism between 1923 and 1940 *Was There an Alternative?*

The renewed assault on the historical reputation of Trotsky in the 1990s grew out of the need of bourgeois ideologists to deny the possibility that the path of Stalinist dictatorship was not the only one that might have been followed in the USSR. Trotsky’s very existence as a revolutionary opponent of the regime—and, moreover, one who posed a major political threat to the Stalinist bureaucracy—had to be denied. Thus, by its very nature and purpose, this assault demanded the revival of the methods of falsification and even the same lies that had been used by the Stalinist regime in its relentless war against Trotsky. All the facts that had been established by historians over the previous 40 years (since the publication of the first volume of Deutscher’s biography in the 1950s) about the life and work of Trotsky had to be, to use what was to become a favorite catch-phrase of the distortionists, “called into question.” This was the self-proclaimed agenda of the so-called *Journal of Trotsky Studies* that was established at the University of Glasgow in the early 1990s. Professor Ian Thatcher was among its co-founders. The journal did not last long. Only four issues were produced. But the *Journal* developed the mode of falsification that was to guide all the anti-Trotsky works that were to be written over the next decade and a half. The main components of this modus operandi were: 1) claims that well-established facts about the life of Trotsky—such as his leadership of the October 1917 insurrection, his critical role as creator and commander of the Red Army, his commitment to internationalism, and his uncompromising opposition to Stalinism—were “myths” ripe for exposure; 2) assertions that Trotsky’s writings, including such acknowledged literary masterworks as his autobiography and his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*, were unreliable; and 3) slurs against Trotsky’s intellectual, political and moral integrity.

The succession of economic crises and mounting geo-political instability in the first decade of the new century provided a further impulse for the assault on Trotsky. As the triumphalism of the 1990s gave way to anxiety about the future of capitalism, reactionary academics recalled with fear the impact of Isaac Deutscher’s biographical trilogy—

*The Prophet and Outcast*,—on a *Unagonization* radicalized youth in the 1960s. Deutscher’s biography led students to even more dangerous material, the writings of Trotsky himself! Throughout Europe and the Americas, tens of thousands of young people experienced the overwhelming intellectual impact of the writings of this political and literary genius. In a period of new and, quite possibly, even greater crisis, was there not a danger that this process might be repeated? How was this to be prevented? Thus, within the space of six years, the three anti-Trotsky biographies of Professors Swain, Thatcher and Service appeared. Each of these biographies began with an explicit denunciation of Deutscher’s work. “Deutscher went along with, and indeed helped to foster the Trotsky myth,” declared Swain.[4] Thatcher mockingly described Deutscher’s biography as reading like “a boy’s own adventure story” and complained that he relied too much on Trotsky’s own writings.[5] Service dismissed Deutscher as one who “worshipped at Trotsky’s shrine.”[6] These books were written with the obvious purpose of inoculating readers against the influence of Trotsky. As Swain bluntly wrote in the second sentence of his book: “Readers of this biography will not find their way to Trotskyism.”[7]



None of these authors emerged from their anti-Trotsky project with either their integrity or reputation intact. I have spent a significant part of the last three years exposing the innumerable falsifications and distortions contained in these books. At times, I have felt something like a lawyer who has only one client. But any hope that I might find some respite from the task of refuting anti-Trotsky slanders and falsification is premature. In October I went to Germany to speak at a meeting in Berlin that had been called to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of Trotsky’s assassination. I was compelled to devote a substantial portion of my remarks to rebutting a diatribe against Trotsky that had been recently written by a member of the history faculty at the Humboldt University. The campaign against Trotsky is clearly not an exclusively Anglo-American enterprise.

In fact, yet another addition to anti-Trotskyist literature has been recently provided by the Russian historian Roy Medvedev. This is a name with which students of Soviet historiography are familiar. He established an international reputation with the publication of *Let History Judge*. The first English-language edition of this work was published in 1972. The second revised edition appeared in 1989. *Let History Judge* was widely seen as the first significant attempt by a Soviet historian to expose the crimes of Stalin and Stalinism. Medvedev’s political outlook was that of a moderate reformer. His writings were directed toward and reflected the outlook of the Khrushchevite and later the Gorbachevite wings of the Soviet bureaucracy. He was never politically sympathetic to Trotsky. Nevertheless, he wrote in *Let History Judge*: “Specifically in regard to Leon Trotsky, his activities and tragic fate require a precise and carefully weighed political and legal evaluation.”[8]

That was written 21 years ago. In his recent essay, which appears as the introduction to a new biography of Leon Trotsky by the Ukrainian-American scholar Georgiy Cherniavskii, Medvedev resorts to the same falsifications that he refuted in *Let History Judge*. Ironically,

Medvedev's introductory essay contradicts the generally favorable portrait of Trotsky provided by Cherniavskii. It is as if the publishers felt an obligation to counter-balance Cherniavskii's positive presentation with Medvedev's harshly negative and dishonest declarations.

There is a staggering contrast between what Medvedev wrote in 1989 and what he writes in 2010. In *Let History Judge*, Medvedev stated:

It is well known that the Petrograd Soviet played the key role in the organization and preparation of the insurrection and it was headed by Trotsky. ... The result of the victorious armed insurrection in Petrograd was the transfer of power to the Soviets. The Provisional Government was overthrown.[9]

... Trotsky's role in the practical preparation and implementation of the October Revolution was exceptionally important, as a great many accounts by direct participants and eyewitnesses of the October Revolution attest.[10]

But what does Medvedev say now?

Yes, in October 1917 Trotsky headed both the Petrograd Soviet and the Military-Revolutionary Committee of this Soviet. An armed uprising was prepared, but it was not needed: power passed from the Provisional Government into the hands of the Soviets swiftly and peacefully; the Red Guards had to take by force only the Moscow Kremlin.[11]

Thus, in order to belittle Trotsky's role in the October Revolution, Medvedev does away with the insurrection in Petrograd. There really was, you see, nothing for Trotsky to do on the evening of October 24-25, 1917. This version is a variant on the approach taken by Ian Thatcher's former colleague at Glasgow University, Professor James White, who wrote in the *Journal of Trotsky Studies* that on the evening of the insurrection, the inept and hapless Trotsky was left behind in the Smolny Institute by his more capable comrades, such as Stalin, to simply answer the phone.

Medvedev wrote in 1989:

There is no question that Trotsky's activity played a fundamental role in transforming the Red Army from a conglomerate of guerilla and semi-guerilla formations into a fairly disciplined military machine. Trotsky was able to organize tens of thousands of former tsarist officers to work in the Army, from noncommissioned officers up to and including generals. If it is true that the Red Army would not have been able to win the Civil War without military commissars, it is also true that it could not have done so without military specialists.[12]

But now Medvedev asserts: "To over-emphasize Trotsky by name as the 'commander-in-chief' of the Red Army was primarily to the advantage of the White-Guard generals." [13]

In *Let History Judge*, Medvedev acknowledged that Trotsky's role in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party was second only to that of Lenin. He wrote:

In 1921-1922 Trotsky was considered the second most important figure in the Bolshevik leadership. Greetings in honor of comrades Lenin and Trotsky were announced at many rallies and meetings, and portraits of Lenin and Trotsky hung on the walls of many Soviet and party institutions. Trotsky's name occurred in songs and military marches. This period was undoubtedly the high point of Trotsky's career as a revolutionary and political leader of the Soviet state. Lenin's attitude toward Trotsky at this time was one of emphatic respect, as was Trotsky's toward Lenin.[14]

But Medvedev's 2010 essay offers a very different appraisal:

However, in actual fact the Bolshevik Party of 1917 had no "second leaders." ... Trotsky often called himself "second" [after Lenin], and was inwardly convinced that he was. This belief formed the basis of his pretensions to power and to Lenin's heritage after the leader had died.

However, as the great Niccolo Paganini once noted, there are many "seconds." It is therefore more precise to speak not about a "second leader," but about a "second rank" of leaders, among whom we can see in 1917-1920 not only Lev Trotsky, but also Yakov Sverdlov, Joseph Stalin, Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, as well as Nikolai Bukharin and Nikolai Krestinsky.[15]

Medvedev's attempt to demote Trotsky is, as he knows all too well, a blatant falsification of the historical record. Yakov Sverdlov played a significant role in the organizational structure of the Bolshevik Party. He was not, however, an independent political leader, let alone a theoretician. As for Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev, their checkered political roles in 1917 are well known. All three, at one point or another, opposed the independent struggle for power by the working class. In March 1917, Stalin and Kamenev (as well as Sverdlov) adopted a conciliatory position toward the bourgeois Provisional Government. In October 1917, Kamenev and Zinoviev opposed the insurrection. Dzerzhinsky played an important role in the early years of the revolution as leader of the Cheka, the state police organization established by the Soviet regime to fight the counter-revolutionary forces. Bukharin, without question, was a significant, though erratic, leader. But neither Dzerzhinsky nor Bukharin remotely approached the stature of Trotsky as revolutionary leaders. As for Krestinsky, a future member of the Left Opposition (and victim of Stalin's purges), he would have been the last person to denigrate Trotsky's role as the co-leader of the October Revolution.

In his current effort to diminish Trotsky's role in 1917, Medvedev minimizes the significance of a well-known comment by Lenin:

On 1 November 1917, at a session of the Petrograd Party Committee, Lenin called Trotsky "the best Bolshevik." But this was a deliberate exaggeration, since Trotsky had only joined the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1917 and had been elected a member of the RSDLP (b) at the Sixth Congress.[16]

In fact, there was nothing off the cuff in this assessment. It was made by Lenin in the midst of a bitter life-and-death struggle against his opponents

within the leadership of the Bolshevik Party who were demanding that he accept the formation of a coalition government with the Mensheviks. The fate of the Bolshevik Party and the revolution was at stake. As recounted by Alex Rabinowitch in his *Bolsheviks in Power*:

At the Petersburg Committee meeting, evidently struggling to maintain his composure with only mixed success, Lenin charged that the behavior of the Central Committee representatives in the Vikzhel meetings was treasonous. The only Bolshevik he singled out for praise was Trotsky. "Trotsky recognized long ago that unification is impossible and from that time on there has been no better Bolshevik." [17]

In his essay on Trotsky in *Revolutionary Silhouettes*, Anatole Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik commissar of culture, described Trotsky as "the second great leader of the Russian revolution." Attempting to compare Lenin and Trotsky, Lunacharsky credited Lenin as a revolutionary politician of "infallible instinct," less prone to be swayed by his emotions, if only temporarily. Lunacharsky's assessment, written in 1919, included the following significant qualifications:

It would be wrong, however, to imagine that *the second great leader of the Russian revolution* is inferior to his colleague in everything: there are, for instance, aspects in which Trotsky incontestably surpasses him—he is more brilliant, he is clearer, he is more active. Lenin is fitted as no one else to take the chair at the Council of People's Commissars and to guide the world revolution with the touch of genius, but he could never have coped with the titanic mission which Trotsky took upon his own shoulders, with those lightning moves from place to place, those astounding speeches, those fanfares of on-the-spot orders, that role of being the unceasing electrifier of a weakening army, now at one spot, now at another. There is not a man on earth who could have replaced Trotsky in that respect. [18] [Italics added]

Medvedev's essay, contemptuous of the historical record, abounds with numerous derogatory comments: "Trotsky little distinguished himself as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs," [19] "In the 1930s Trotsky's role and influence were inflated and exaggerated by European governments..." [20] "No one, either in the past or present, could coherently outline even in a small pamphlet certain 'foundations of Trotskyism.'" [21]

Such statements indicate the extent of Medvedev's intellectual regression. But even worse, in the light of Medvedev's past work, is his new appraisal of Stalin. The greatest strength of *Let History Judge* was its denunciation of Stalin's role in Soviet history. Medvedev explained that *Let History Judge* was written, in part, to answer "stubborn attempts to rehabilitate Stalin that have persisted since 1969." [22] He argued against those in the Soviet bureaucracy who sought, in one way or another, to justify or minimize Stalin's criminal activities. Medvedev opposed the widespread claim that Stalin's activities in the 1920s were correct, and that only his later actions should be condemned. Stalin had inflicted devastating damage to the cause of socialism in the Soviet Union and internationally. Medvedev explained that while Stalin used Marxist phrases to legitimize his actions, he was never a Marxist.

But now Medvedev offers an entirely different appraisal of Stalin, who, he writes:

...much better than Trotsky studied all of Lenin's works, many of which Trotsky never even read. It was Stalin, therefore, who was able rather quickly and successfully to rework Lenin's theoretical heritage into a rather integral conception of the 'foundations of Leninism'... Neither Trotsky, nor Bukharin, nor Kamenev, nor Zinoviev was able to do this, although they tried. All of Trotsky's attempts to base himself on Lenin's theoretical and political heritage proved unsuccessful and were easily refuted by Stalin. But without the support of Lenin's heritage, Trotsky had no chance at winning recognition and achieving victory. [23]

And so the reader is led to conclude that it was Stalin who represented the heritage of Lenin, and that accounts for his victory over Trotsky. Medvedev gives other reasons for Stalin's victory: "[W]hen it came to the force of character, to political will, ruthlessness and many other qualities that are needed in the struggle for power, Stalin greatly surpassed Trotsky." [24] But in *Let History Judge*, Medvedev wrote scornfully of those who spoke with admiration of Stalin's "will":

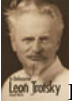
An assassin who shoots from ambush hardly needs a stronger will than his victim. An honorable man abstains from crimes not because he lacks a strong character; his character is simply directed toward other goals. Too often we call a man strong who violates all the accepted norms of human relations and all the rules of honorable struggle; the more he flouts these rules, the stronger and more resolute he seems to some people. In fact, most crimes evince not strength of will, but weakness of moral principles. [25]

What accounts for Medvedev's terrible intellectual degeneration? He is clearly another victim of the collapse of the USSR, which has destroyed his political and moral equilibrium. Medvedev has become a fervent admirer of Vladimir Putin, whom he compares to Peter the Great! This disorientation is not simply a matter of Medvedev's personal weakness. Notwithstanding his earlier condemnation of Stalinism, his political opposition to Trotskyism foreclosed the possibility of achieving a comprehensive critique of the Soviet regime. Its collapse took him by surprise, and he drifted, like so many other Soviet intellectuals, into the reactionary milieu of Russian nationalism and chauvinism. This is what has drawn him to Stalin.

In his better years, Medvedev wrote that Stalinism might legitimately be described as a "serious and prolonged disease of Soviet society." This was a fruitful and suggestive idea, which can be of use in an investigation of anti-Trotskyism. There is a distinctly pathological element in the persistence, over many decades, of the falsification of every aspect of Trotsky's thought and activities. But the source of this disease is not biological, but social. It is a manifestation of intense contradictions in society. In periods of mounting crisis, anti-Trotskyism flares up as an ideological defense mechanism against the revolutionary critique of the existing social order and the growing potential for working class resistance to capitalist oppression.

Alexander Rabinowitch—one of the few contemporary historians who, though not a Marxist, still deeply believes in the historical significance of October—made this same point in a more direct and simple way. Why, I asked him recently, did the attacks on Trotsky continue 70 years after his death. "Because," he replied, "Trotsky is still a threat." Indeed, to all those who defend injustice and inequality, he certainly is.

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David North is the author of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, a critical examination of three recently-published biographies of Trotsky.

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#### Notes

[1] See “The Blackmail of the Single Alternative: Bukharin, Trotsky and Perestrojka,” in *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Volume 40, No. 1/3, August-November 1990, pp. 159-188. [back]

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 163. [back]

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 170 [back]

[4] *Trotsky* (Longman, 2006), p. 1) [back]

[5] *Trotsky* (Routledge, 2003), pp. 14-16 [back]

[6] *Trotsky* (Macmillan, 2009), p. xx1 [back]

[7] Swain, p. 1 [back]

[8] *Let History Judge*, (Columbia, 1989), p. 18. [back]

[9] pp. 47-48. [back]

[10] pp. 102. [back]

[11] Roy Medvedev, “Predislovie” [Foreword], in: Georgii Cherniavskii, *Lev Trotskii* (Moskva: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2010), p. 9 (unpublished English translation from the Russian). [back]

[12] *Let History Judge*, p. 104. [back]

[13] Medvedev, “Predislovie”, p. 10. [back]

[14] *Let History Judge*, p. 109. [back]

[15] Medvedev, “Predislovie”, p. 8. [back]

[16] *Ibid.* [back]

[17] p. 33 [back]

[18] Penguin Press, 1967, p. 68. [back]

[19] Medvedev, “Predislovie”, p. 9. [back]

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 10. [back]

[21] *Ibid.* [back]

[22] p. xiv [back]

[23] Medvedev, “Predislovie”, p. 9. [back]

[24] *Ibid.* [back]

[25] p. 593 [back]

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