



Trotsky: A Biography

By Robert Service

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Robert Service completes his masterful trilogy on the founding figures of the Soviet Union in an eagerly anticipated, authoritative biography of Leon Trotsky.

Trotsky is perhaps the most intriguing and, given his prominence, the most understudied of the Soviet revolutionaries. Using new archival sources including family letters, party and military correspondence, confidential speeches, and medical records, Service offers new insights into Trotsky. He discusses Trotsky's fractious relations with the leaders he was trying to bring into a unified party before 1914; his attempt to disguise his political closeness to Stalin; and his role in the early 1920s as the progenitor of political and cultural Stalinism. Trotsky evinced a surprisingly glacial and schematic approach to making revolution. Service recounts Trotsky's role in the botched German revolution of 1923; his willingness to subject Europe to a Red Army invasion in the 1920s; and his assumption that peasants could easily be pushed onto collective farms. Service also sheds light on Trotsky's character and personality: his difficulties with his Jewish background, the development of his oratorical skills and his preference for writing over politicking, his inept handling of political factions and coldness toward associates, and his aversion to assuming personal power.

Although Trotsky's followers clung to the stubborn view of him as a pure revolutionary and a powerful intellect unjustly hounded into exile by Stalin, the reality is very different. This illuminating portrait of the man and his legacy sets the record straight.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Having covered Lenin and Stalin, Oxford history professor Service completes his biographical trilogy with the life of Leon Trotsky. Thick and intensely researched but a pleasure to read, it should remain the definitive work for some time. Trotsky (1879–1940) flashed like a comet across the political sky, sharing credit with Lenin for winning the 1917 revolution but losing the battle to succeed him after his 1923 death. While this outline is well known, Service mines new and old sources to fill in the details. A brilliant writer and speaker but too arrogant to attract a following, Trotsky had no chance against the methodical Stalin, whom he repeatedly insulted. Stalin forced him into exile in 1929 and had him murdered in 1940. Before and during exile, Trotsky poured out histories, memoirs and journalism, heavily influencing our picture of the revolution and its major figures. Service emphasizes that he was no objective observer. Stalin was not as stupid as portrayed, and Trotsky had no objection to mass murder when it served his purposes. This is a thoughtful, rewarding and essential contribution to 20th-century history. 50 b&w photos. (Nov.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Following Lenin (2000) and Stalin (2005), this work continues Service's series about leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution. Looming in his portrait of Trotsky, the Bolsheviks' outstanding orator and commander of Communist forces in the Russian Civil War, is whether Trotsky could have prevailed in the post-Lenin power struggle. Service allows the possibility, but his commentary about Trotsky's traits and habits militate against it. Developing Trotsky's characteristics, Service detects in the young man a self-assured talent for Marxist polemics and a neglect of others' sensitivities that eventually earned him enemies inside the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky excelled in verbal virtuosity (the "dustbin of history" is his coinage) but, as Service recounts, was a terrible listener. He disdained ideas other than his own, an arrogance palpable to and resented by the Bolshevik elite. Compounding Trotsky's disadvantage, Service writes, was his clumsiness in the political maneuvering to succeed Lenin. Rounding out his depiction with Trotsky's private life, which included an abandoned wife and children, Service solidly updates the hitherto definitive biography (hagiography, to critics) by Isaac Deutscher. --Gilbert Taylor

Review

Thick and intensely researched but a pleasure to read, it should remain the definitive work for some time...This is a thoughtful, rewarding and essential contribution to 20th-century history. (starred review) (*Publishers Weekly* 2009-09-28)

Robert Service delivers an outstanding, fascinating biography of this dazzling titan. It is compelling as an adventure story--the ultimate rise and fall--but also revelatory as the scholarly revision of a historical reputation...The portrait of Trotsky's forgotten world of Jewish farmers and poverty-stricken Russian aristocrats is eccentric and intriguing. Trotsky himself hid much of his background that Service reveals for the first time...At the end of Service's revision, what remains of the Prophet? The intellectual, orator, manager of the Bolshevik coup and architect of the Civil War victory remain, but alongside them must be laid the mendacity of his memoirs, the ugly egotism and unpleasant, overweening arrogance, the belief in and enthusiastic practice of killing on a colossal scale, the political ineptitude, the limit of ambition. Apart from their famous row about "socialism in one country" versus international revolution, there was little politically between Stalin and Trotsky. It was personality that divided them and both personalities were highly unattractive. If Trotsky had become dictator, Service is clear that while Russia would have avoided

Stalin's personal sadism, the same millions would still have been killed. (Simon Sebag Montefiore *Sunday Telegraph* 2009-10-11)

In this astonishingly comprehensive book--Robert Service has trawled almost every archive on the planet that has any reference to Trotsky--we get a clear picture of Trotsky's political development, his part in the 1917 revolution, his differences with Lenin, his break with Stalin and, finally, the years of exile and agitation in which he attracted a ragbag of bizarre followers and made the mistake of professing that there was a form of communism different to Stalin's...This is a superb work of scholarship, and above all leaves the reader in no doubt as to the evil of Trotsky, not just in politics but in his personal life...If you seek to know about this crucial figure in the history of Marxism-Leninism, this book will tell you everything. (Simon Heffer *Daily Telegraph* 2009-10-24)

If only, his adherents argued, it had been Trotsky who had succeeded Lenin and not Stalin, then the USSR might have been spared its famines and its terrors, its show trials and its denials of freedom...Now, 50 years after the last full-scale biography of Trotsky in English, Robert Service has turned his attention to this myth--and has, effectively, assassinated Trotsky all over again...If one can imagine the most obnoxious middle-class student radical one has ever met--bitter, sneering, arrogant, selfish, cocky, callous, callow, blinkered and condescending--and if one freezes that image, applies a pair of pince-nez and transports it back to the beginning of the last century, then one has Trotsky...Service makes it absolutely plain that Trotskyism was Stalinism in embryo...Seldom has the pathology of the revolutionary type, and its murderous consequences, been more mercilessly exposed than in this exemplary biography. (Robert Harris *Sunday Times* 2009-10-18)

Distinguishing the work is its extensive use of archival sources and rare contemporary published materials, much of it used for the first time in this biography. Service casts a critical eye on Trotsky's own writings and the interpretations of his followers and finds Trotsky's diagnosis of his defeat by Stalin self-serving and misleading...Service succeeds in recovering many of the aspects of Trotsky's life that the revolutionary and his followers tried to bury...A readable and persuasive biography that should be required reading for students of the Soviet Union and the history of world communism. (Sean Pollock *Library Journal (starred review)* 2009-11-01)

The idea that a humane communism could have come out of Trotskyism is pure romanticism, Service says. Yet, Trotskyites maintain even today that the tragedy of Soviet history lay in Trotsky's failure to win the battle of succession for leadership of the Soviet Union. Service's biography will not convince them otherwise. But for those with an open mind, *Trotsky: A Biography* shows that in the end, Stalin and Trotsky were blood brothers. Blood being the operative word. (Christopher Orlet *American Spectator* 2009-11-17)

Robert Service fashions a vivid portrait of this brilliant, merciless ideologue, who did not hesitate to drag his country kicking, screaming and bleeding toward the utopia he dreamed of creating for it...[Service] approaches Trotsky without emotional or ideological attachment. He has also mined a rich lode of newly accessible archival material, including documents that reveal Trotsky's support for cruel methods while Lenin was still actively leading the government...More than anything else, Service compels us to look at Trotsky as he really was rather than to accept the image that Trotsky conjured for himself. (Joshua Rubenstein *Wall Street Journal* 2009-11-18)

Trotsky helps explain both the allure and the danger of the mass murderer who was affectionately known to his followers as "the Old Man." (Adam Kirsch *New Republic* 2009-12-07)

Trotsky, even before one of Stalin's agents found him in Mexico and assassinated him with an ice axe, was a romantic figure to those who believed that if only he had succeeded Lenin everything would have been

better. Service, who has also written studies of Lenin and Stalin, does an excellent job of dispensing with such notions...Service's book, unlike much writing about Trotsky, is the work of a historian, not an ideologue, and the better for it. (*New Yorker* 2009-11-30)

Robert Service's iconoclastic yet rigorously balanced portrait of the fiery intellectual who helped Lenin cement Bolshevik power in Russia strips away the elaborate myths and lies that have buttressed Trotsky's place in the pantheon of revolutionary martyrs. Using new archival resources--including family letters, party and military correspondence, confidential notes, and, perhaps most interesting of all, medical records--Service gives us a keen understanding of the character and intellect, peccadilloes and virtues of one of the key, yet wildly misunderstood figures in 20th century history...With his impressive book, Service completes his trilogy of the giants--Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky--who fashioned the Soviet state. There is no facet of Trotsky's life that hasn't been examined in detail, from his character and finances to his quarrels with party comrades over the minutiae of Communist dogma and his struggle with his Jewish roots. Encyclopedic is the word, and it is oh, so well written. (Michael J. Bonafield *Minneapolis Star Tribune* 2009-11-28)

Trotsky is fascinating, detailed, highly intelligent, and meticulously researched...Service is among the very best living historians of the Soviet Union and Russia, and he is supremely good at stitching together the broad outlines of complex lives and developments. (Peter Savodnik *Commentary* 2009-12-01)

Service never lets his reader forget Trotsky's callousness, and rightly so: on the few occasions that Trotsky worked in conjunction with Stalin--suppressing the Orthodox Church, deporting dissident intellectuals--he equalled or even exceeded the Georgian in ruthlessness. Some of the worst aspects of the Soviet system, such as the use of military force to exterminate rebellious starving peasants, or the exploitation of concentration camp inmates for hard labour, were devised by Trotsky...*Trotsky* is the final part of a triptych, and you can sense the author's enjoyment as he completes his heroic task. (Donald Rayfield *Times Literary Supplement* 2009-10-21)

In a sober narrative thick with political details, both fresh and familiar, Service deflates the notion that the Old Man offered either a humane or plausible alternative to his unlamented comrades. The only major difference between Trotsky and his fellow Bolshevik leaders was that he never got the chance to wield total power...Service is the first major biographer of Trotsky to portray him as myopic villain instead of defeated prophet. (Michael Kazin *The Daily Beast* 2009-12-08)

Trotsky, the Bolshevik most powerfully associated with persisting hopes of global transformation, has had many biographers including the classic trilogy by Isaac Deutscher. Robert Service, less admiring by far, has uncovered a mass of new information, some of which makes for a pretty unattractive view of the man. *Trotsky: A Biography* is sparkling on his political and personal travails, and indeed his crimes and follies. (Stephen Howe *The Independent* 2009-12-11)

A massive study of Trotsky, a grotesque character, politically and personally, even by the demanding standards of communism. (Joseph C. Goulden *Washington Times* 2009-12-28)

In [Service's] account, he is a figure more of fascination than admiration--quite in contrast to earlier biographies written by his devotees. He is a compelling crowd rouser but remote and cold personally, puritanical but more than a little lascivious, and the object of fervid political devotion yet ruthless in the pursuit of his compassionless notion of revolution. Service deals with Trotsky's life from boyhood to the end but concentrates on the critical period from his days as a youthful revolutionary and foe of Bolshevism through the 1920s and the dramatic arc from his ascendancy to his defeat. The writing is trim and unadorned, allowing Service to march expeditiously over new ground: Trotsky's early political affinity with Stalin, the

smug self-confidence that worked against him in the post-1923 maneuvering, and his moments of striking political insight, which were matched by those of disastrous misjudgment. (Robert Legvold *Foreign Affairs* 2010-01-01)

[Service] has produced a valuable handbook on the life of one of the twentieth century's most fascinating--and still puzzling--personalities. (Stephen Schwartz *First Things* 2010-02-02)

Robert Service has written what will undoubtedly be the definitive biography of Trotsky...It is the achievement in particular of Robert Service not only to have uncovered new material from previously unavailable Soviet archives, but to have cast new light on many of his writings and activities. He forces us to reinterpret drastically what it was Trotsky believed and fought for. Rather than being some kind of alternative to Stalin, Trotsky undoubtedly would have created a regime as monstrous and horrific as that which came to exist. (Ronald Radosh *New Criterion* 2010-05-01)

This absorbing, well-written biography presents a major reassessment of the life and career of Leon Trotsky...The biography is distinctive, in part, because it casts a critical yet judicious and well-founded view on Trotsky's life and is written by distinguished Oxford historian Service, who has a deep understanding of the events and actors of the period. The author uses newly available archival materials such as telegrams, letters, and other documents to build a more accurate portrayal of his complex subject. In addition, Service reconsiders the large volume of materials that has long been available about Trotsky and subjects it to innovative scrutiny that often yields interesting results...This book will undoubtedly become the standard biography of Trotsky, and it is unlikely to be superseded for many years. (N. M. Brooks *Choice* 2010-04-01)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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