
Ah! Trotsky, Trotsky, Trotsky! Last repository of Bolshevik revolutionary hopes; fabricator of dreams of a new world and a new humanity; consummate cafe intellectual; incisive wit, capable of spearing any opponent on the sharpest of phrases; useless politician in his own interest, but improbably brilliant organiser of the Red Army; inspiration for victory over the Whites and interventionists; faithless husband to one woman, devoted partner to another; neglectful parent for certain of his children, doting father for others; enduring icon; martyr; teacher to the last of the true believers. How does Robert Service capture this complex, mercurial, brilliant, cruel, ultra-focused intellectual zealot? First and foremost, Service gives us a fuller account of the events of his life than any of Trotsky’s other biographers. Service has done an incredible amount of heavy lifting, which puts all who are interested in Trotsky in his debt. He has pursued information in the remotest of places. The result is not, however, an especially revisionist view of Trotsky; rather, it is a more complete view with much of the legend trimmed away. As in other recent Trotsky biographies, notably by Geoffrey Swain and Ian D. Thatcher, it is Service’s investigation of Trotsky’s early life which contains the most new material. It was precisely the main features of his formative years—provinceal, rural, entrepreneurial, kulak, Jewish—which Trotsky tried to shrug off, even suppress, as he constructed himself as the great revolutionary. As Service puts it, “his account of himself has been accepted uncritically by generations of readers. The reality was different, for whenever inconvenient facts obscured his desired image he removed or distorted them.”(11) It is for recovering those “inconvenient facts” that Service is to be thanked. Not that all his readers have seen it that way. Devotees of Trotsky have been sufficiently unhappy to publish a counter-pamphlet, and to conduct a campaign to denounce Service for many things when he speaks at
public lectures, including anti-Semitism, a charge which arises from an absurd reading of Service’s account. If anything, this anger of the believers is testimony to Service’s effectiveness. His account is full of perceptive comments. Discussing Trotsky’s crucial role as head of the Red Army and, implicitly, his chances of becoming Lenin’s successor, Service says “he lacked the talent to manage his own talent.”(228) Though he was “a valiant revolutionary” and an “adaptable military leader... his record as a politician was woeful: he punched when he should have embraced.”(225) There, in a few words, one has so much of Trotsky. He was certainly a man who preferred the metaphorical punch to the embrace, not only in his public life, but often in his personal relations as well. Here, as elsewhere, he could not match Stalin who, when he was in dispute with Lenin in December 1922, sent a message to him via Lenin’s sister, Maria Ulyanova, asking her to tell him “I love him with all my soul!”(300)

As with his biography of Lenin, Service points out the frequency and, sometimes, crucially important timing, of Trotsky’s bouts of illness, though he does question the myth that Stalin deliberately misled him over the date of Lenin’s funeral when he was on his way to the Caucasus for a health-restoring break.(312) Other aspects of Trotsky’s life and character are more familiar. He believed art was “the highest test of the liveliness and significance of each epoch,” (314) but professed a preference for Demian Bedny, producer of revolutionary doggerel, over the sublime symbolism of Alexander Blok.(317-8) He was undoubtedly capable of mordant wit. When an official turned off the lights to hamper one of his addresses to fellow oppositionists in 1927, he commented that “Lenin said that socialism was the soviets plus electrification. Stalin has already suppressed the soviets, now it’s the turn of the electricity.” But, as Service comments, Trotsky was being disingenuous since “he had done as much as anyone to suppress the soviets.”(362) In fact, perhaps because his intense dislike of Stalin is greater, Service sometimes underestimates Trotsky’s own capacity for cruel adherence to principles over people. He tells us, chillingly, that Trotsky was ready “to burn several thousand Russians to a cinder in order to create a true revolutionary
American movement.”(313) Perhaps Service should have speculated that, had he succeeded in coming to power, Trotsky might have been even more ruthless than Stalin. There is little to suggest he was not at least his equal. Service has also trodden on Trotskyist toes by appearing to share the views of an erstwhile follower, James Burnham, who wrote in a famous open letter to Trotsky that “Trotsky’s purposes were often polemical rather than fundamentally intellectual.”(471-2) Service goes on to state that Trotsky’s “thought was a confused and confusing ragbag” (353) and superbly demonstrates it by deconstructing the self-serving and manipulative distortions in Trotsky’s 1923-4 oppositional critique. In the nine pages of Chapter 37, “What Trotsky Wanted,” Service demolishes the myth that Trotsky was somehow advocating a more humane socialism. One can see how Service’s approach might enrage not only the believers, but others as well. After all, Baruch Knei-Paz took Trotsky’s thought sufficiently seriously to devote a very solid and brilliant study to analysing it. One might also say that Service’s account is rather “cool,” in the sense that Marshall McLuhan used the term: it is undramatic, and presents Trotsky’s life as somewhat detached from the great dramas swirling around him. Nonetheless, this is a definitive account of the life of an extraordinary person capable, at one extreme, of extraordinary naivety. Not only did he expect Polish peasants to welcome the Red Army in 1920, (476) he never renounced the socialist duty to defend the Soviet Union despite Stalin. He even argued, during the 1939-40 Winter War with Finland, that “Sovietization would have brought inestimable benefit to Finland.”(478) On the other hand, his arrogance, inability to see any errors in himself, and devotion to principle over people, makes one relieved that he never had the unlimited political opportunity to express these baleful talents.

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