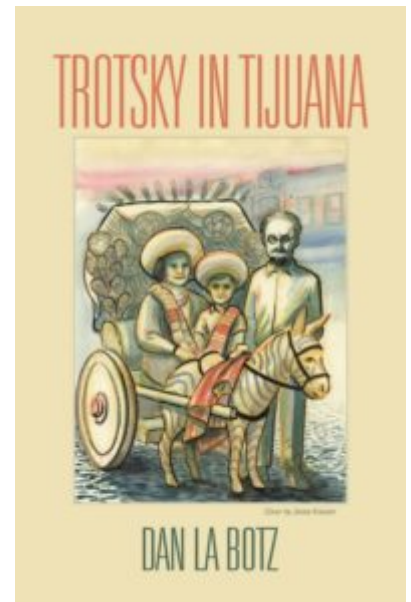


Counter-historical Revolutionary: Dan La Botz's "Trotsky in Tijuana"

Book Review



Trotsky in Tijuana (Booklocker–Serge Press, 2020, 471 pages. \$20.99)

Dan La Botz, the author of some dozen non-fiction books on politics and history, has published this first novel eighty years after the murder of Leon Trotsky by an agent of Joseph Stalin in Mexico City on August 20, 1940. Trotsky was, after Lenin, the most important leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution: Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, chief organizer and head of the Red Army during the civil war of 1918-1921, and from 1924 leader of the Left Opposition against Stalin's rise to power. In consolidating his bureaucratic counter-revolution, Stalin succeeded, step by step, in marginalizing Trotsky and in 1928 forced him into exile. Trotsky continued his political work in Turkey, France, and Norway before finally being invited by the reformist Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas to settle in the Coyoacán area of Mexico City.

It was there, a few months after a failed assassination

attempt on May 24, 1940, that Ramón Mercader, a Spanish-born agent of the NKVD (forerunner of the KGB), attacked Trotsky in his home office and severely wounded him with a mountaineer's ice axe. Trotsky died the following day at age 60 and was buried near the house where he lived. His mourners included large crowds of ordinary Mexican citizens.

A statement by the publisher on the copyright page of *Trotsky in Tijuana* states that "While this is a counterfactual historical novel inspired by the lives of real people, all of the characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real person, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author." La Botz provides a less confusing description in "A Note on Sources" that follows the final chapter: "In writing this counter-historical novel, I drew on many sources . . . to more accurately portray the period and my fictional characters" (p. 465). What this characterization implies is that "counter-historical" writing doesn't exclude or avoid the "historical" (like, say, "fantasy"), but stands in dynamic relationship to it: the "counter-historical" depends on, even as it differs from and extends beyond, the "historical." "Counter-historical" fiction inevitably calls attention to and provokes curiosity about the extent to which characters and events are either rooted in or independent of historical actuality.

The relationship between history and fiction that I'm describing here is built into the narrative organization of *Trotsky in Tijuana*. We begin in the summer of 1939: Stalin's "show trials" of 1936 have resulted in the deaths of thousands of old Bolsheviks; Fascist Italy has annexed Ethiopia and Albania and signed a treaty of cooperation with Nazi Germany; Hitler's *Anschluss* has incorporated Austria and the Czech Sudetenland into the Third Reich and is about to invade Poland, marking the formal beginning of World War II. Trotsky and his second wife, Natalia Sedova, along with their young son Lev Sedov, arrived in Mexico in January 1937. At first

they lived with the artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in La Casa Azul (The Blue House). But in April 1939, after Trotsky's affair with Kahlo precipitated a break with Rivera, they moved a few blocks away to a residence in the same Coyoacán area of Mexico City. Trotsky's work at the time was primarily focused on building the Fourth International, an organization of revolutionary socialists around the world dedicated to opposing Stalinism.

The first seven chapters of *Trotsky in Tijuana*, by offering various perspectives on this period right before Mercador's violent assault on Trotsky in August 1940, work in the usual ways of historical fiction. This includes the introduction of fictional characters into a narrative that we clearly recognize as historical. The most consequential of these fictional characters (at least I think he's mainly fictional) is Ralph Bucek, a young working-class guy from Chicago's Southside who, inspired by hearing a speech by a leading American Trotskyist, travels to Mexico City and joins the small group dedicated to protecting Trotsky and his family.

Ralph is not just an important character in the novel, however: he is also represented as the author of the Preface, dated "Chula Vista, California, 1961." After sketching out the main events of his life and his relationship with Trotsky, he says in this Preface: "I am uniquely situated to write what is a true account of Trotsky in those years in Tijuana and I can state sincerely that this novel is also history and that this fiction is also truth." What La Botz has done here, we might say, is to create a fictional author who claims a fictional authenticity for a narrative that is actually a complex blend of fiction and history. Readers will no doubt have different responses to this opening move, which is in some respects at odds with what La Botz himself says in his "Note on Sources." He might have made Ralph the narrator of the novel itself, but that would have produced a book very different from the one we have. Instead, after a Preface in which he identifies himself

as the author, Ralph becomes a third-person character in a novel with an unidentified omniscient narrator.



The crucial turn in *Trotsky in Tijuana* from “historical” to “counter-historical” fiction comes in Chapter 8, where Mercador’s historical assassination of Trotsky’s is transformed into an attempted assassination and escape. I won’t reveal exactly how this happens; I’ll just say that the

details are surprising in many ways and that Ralph plays a key role in Trotsky’s fictional survival. The last two paragraphs in this chapter dramatically foreground the shift into counter-historical discourse. All the verbs are conditional—“would have happened,” “would have been taken,” “would have run,” “would have made,” “would have meant,” “would have been left,” “would have evolved”—until the final sentence: “But remarkably, Trotsky survived” (p. 46).

The next chapter takes its title from words spoken by Natalia Sedova: “We shall have a little more time . . .” On August 21, 1940, the date of Trotsky’s actual death, President Cárdenas visits the counter-historical Trotskys and insists that conditions have become too dangerous in Mexico City. He has arranged for Trotsky, his family, and his guards to move to the small Baja California town of Tijuana, just across the border from San Diego some 15 miles to the north. We are told that the population of Tijuana at this time was around 15,000 (today it’s the sixth largest city in Mexico, with a post-NAFTA population well over 1.5 million). In 1940 Tijuana was already economically dependent on bars, nightclubs, and brothels that catered mainly to US navy and marine personnel stationed in and around San Diego.

Imagining Leon Trotsky as a resident of this particular

Mexican town is the source of much that's entertaining as well as historically and politically challenging in this novel. We learn from a final note "About the Author" that from the age of 11 La Botz himself lived, studied, and worked in the area of California just north of Tijuana. His cultural attachment to and political understanding of this area, on both sides of the border, enables him to create a rich and unexpected counter-historical environment for the novel's "what if" conjectures about Trotsky's life and work.

La Botz imagines Trotsky continuing his political work with tireless concentration and determination. Every day he reads newspaper in Russian, German, English, French, and Spanish as well as a constantly replenished library of books and articles; he maintains a vast correspondence with comrades around the world dedicated to the Fourth International project; he generates his own written interventions by using a Dictaphone to produce texts that will then be revised and edited for distribution or publication. Trotsky's discipline and concentration are represented as astonishing—and inseparable from limitations in his personal relationships. He loves Natalia and Lev and feels affection for those who work with and for him. But the project of preparing and providing leadership for an international socialist revolution is always the priority.

Trotsky's most significant contribution during the 1930s was his analysis of the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere around the world. Especially important in this respect was his updating of a "united front" strategy, first articulated in 1922, that would enable revolutionary organizations of the working class to build resistance alongside non-revolutionary anti-fascist forces without dissolving or surrendering their own independence. As the early stages of World War II developed, Trotsky came to assert two additional and more problematic positions. One was that the war would produce a near-total collapse of the global

capitalist system. The other was that in the wake of this collapse, the working class would rise up in opposition to both fascism and capitalist war and begin the process of carrying out an international revolutionary transformation of society. The Hitler-Stalin pact of August 23, 1939 showed that Stalin's vision of "socialism in one country" was a corrupt lie. Trotsky continued to believe that the Soviet Union was a "degenerated" workers' state—a workers' state "with bureaucratic distortions." He insisted that Stalin's dictatorship would be swept away in a global wave of working-class self-emancipation.

Trotsky in Tijuana isn't exclusively devoted to Trotsky's political work. More personal psychological concerns also make their way into the novel, particularly in a sequence beginning with Chapter 27, "Natalia Seeks Help for Trotsky." Concerned that political isolation and frustration were causing Trotsky to become seriously depressed—and knowing that Trotsky was an admirer of Freud and, when he lived in Vienna in 1913-14, had begun psychoanalysis with Freud's follower Alfred Adler—Natalia contacts an Austrian psychotherapist named David Bergman, now based in Los Angeles, and arranges for him to visit Trotsky in Tijuana. They have serious extended discussions—but Trotsky is adamantly unwilling to undergo treatment.

These discussions are arranged through a mutual friend named Morrie Gold, a flamboyant nightclub promoter who also introduces the Trotskys to one of the novel's most remarkable characters, a brilliant and extraordinary Jewish "comedienne" (as the novel refers to her) named Rachel Silberstein. Trotsky falls in love with Rachel and eventually has an affair with her, which precipitates a serious crisis in his relationship with Natalia. I have no clear idea of how to judge the historical or counter-historical significance of this part of the novel, but it makes for fascinating, and ultimately very painful, reading.

La Botz's novel shows Trotsky spending much of his time and energy trying to resolve factional disagreements within the international Trotskyist movement—disagreements that partly arose from Trotsky's own exaggerated sense of terminal capitalist crisis and of the imminent strength and unity of the international working class. He also shows Trotsky stubbornly and proudly refusing to listen seriously to revolutionary socialists who disagreed with him and recurrently insisting on his own unique leadership. The central questions posed by *Trotsky in Tijuana* have to do not just with the character and direction of Trotsky's influence at the time of his actual death in 1940, but with whether or not that influence would have changed had he lived another 13 years—that is, as long as Stalin himself.

My own speculation is that Trotsky's position would have been significantly affected by the unimaginable number of workers killed during the Nazi holocaust, by the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Allied bombings of cities in Europe and Asia—and by the strength and influence of the U.S. economy following World War II. Reading La Botz's novel has prompted me to rethink the effects of that war on the fate of revolutionary socialism in the latter half of the 20th century.

The clearest indication of the novel's underlying political perspective may perhaps be seen in Chapters 53 and 54, where Victor Serge, the Belgium-born former-Bolshevik, novelist, poet, and historian visit the Trotskys. An anarchist in his early years, Serge remained loyal to the 1917 Revolution and joined Trotsky and the Left Opposition after Lenin's death. But he was always in some respects at odds with Leninist centralism and severe party discipline. La Botz writes: "While he became a Bolshevik, [Serge] remained a libertarian at heart" (p. 308). During his imagined visit to Tijuana in Chapter 54, Serge argues that Trotsky's vision of an imminent international working-class revolution following World War II is "a utopian ideal for the future" (p. 318), not a realistic

analysis for socialist advance in the present. In addition, Serge believes that, "Lenin's democratic centralist model before the revolution was lost" (p. 322) in the course of the civil war and in the failure of Marxist revolutions to succeed in other countries. The only immediately feasible project for the mid-1940s, in Serge's view, is "the laying of a humanistic foundation for a future democratic socialist movement" (p. 324). Trotsky furiously accuses Serge of having abandoned the revolutionary cause and turns his back on his former comrade. "And so in dusty Tijuana," the chapter concludes, "two of the Russian Revolution's great figures, the last two Bolsheviks, its leading theoretician and man of action and its great intellectual-artist, parted. They would never meet again" (p. 324).

Trotsky in Tijuana is divided into four parts: "Saved," "War," "Post-War," "Love and Death." Within and across these divisions are chapters that focus, alternately, on Trotsky and on Stalin—and on the characters that the novel depicts as their future assassins. In Chapter 15 we are introduced to a member of Trotsky's original Mexico City "team" named Jan van Heijenoort, called "Van," a Dutch immigrant who had grown up in France, became a dedicated Trotskyist, and now insists that nothing short of the assassination of Stalin can restore the possibility of socialist revolution. Trotsky angrily disagrees, shouting "We will not resort to terrorism and assassination" (p. 83). The fictional Van is determined and finally carries out his plan in Chapters 77-78, poisoning Stalin with a large dose of the anti-coagulant warfarin secretly added to a bottle of wine. (Historically, though there were rumors that Stalin had been poisoned by his second-in-command Lavrentiy Beria, the medical conclusion was death primarily due to a massive brain hemorrhage.)

Van's counterpart and rival is Mark Zborowsky, who calls himself Étienne. He had worked with Trotsky's and Natalia's deceased son Lyova in France during the 1930s; in 1942 he

presents himself as an admirer of Trotsky's political positions and is invited to become Trotsky's "Russian secretary." He makes a brief and, as it turns out, sinister appearance near the end of the confrontation between Trotsky and Serge in Chapter 54. Étienne is really an agent of the GPU, Stalin's intelligence and secret police service. He bides his time until finally, on March 5, 1953, he fatally poisons Trotsky by putting ricin powder in his orange juice. (The "real" Mark Zborowsky was an anthropologist and an NKVD mole in Paris and in the US. He served a four-year prison sentence in New York in 1962 for spying. Upon release he resumed his academic career and died in 1990 at age 82).

For readers who may feel that by historicizing La Botz's "counter-historical" novel I'm spoiling the plot, I can only restate my view that fiction of this kind inevitably provokes us to think about the history that's being "countered" or re-imagined. So what are the consequences for our historical understanding of Trotsky and Stalin of having them both die at the hands of assassins on the actual day of Stalin's death? This climactic move in *Trotsky in Tijuana* underscores the degree to which they represented antithetical political visions of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. But I find myself resisting the political implications of making their deaths so starkly symmetrical. One of the seven quotations that follow the title-page of this novel is from *Sketches for an Autobiography* (1960) by A.J. Muste (1885-1967), a Dutch-born American clergyman and activist in the labor, pacifist, and antiwar movements: "Trotsky controlled his followers about as autocratically as Stalin controlled his, though of course Trotsky did not have at his command the crude disciplinary instrument which Stalin had in such abundance." I find this seriously misleading. We can acknowledge Trotsky's misjudgments and resistance to being challenged without seeing his influence as in any sense whatsoever the equivalent of Stalin's genocidal oppression.

Trotsky in Tijuana recognizes the importance of Trotsky's revolutionary vision and leadership in the years before he was exiled from Russia. And it shows that the force of his commitment to the transformative power of the working class continued into the 1930s, especially in the fight against fascism. But both the historical and the counter-historical agenda of the novel emphasize the limitations and misjudgments of the last 4-5 years of his life. That being said, this is a skillfully written and politically engaging book—certainly among the best of the novels in English based on Trotsky's life. (For an informative review of four such novels published fairly recently, see Paul Le Blanc, "Trotsky—truth and fiction," *International Socialist Review* # 75, January 2011). Tony Cliff's 4-volume biography of Trotsky (London: Bookmarks, 1989-1993) should, I believe, have been included in La Botz's "Note on Sources." Readers interested in an overview of *Trotsky in Tijuana* considerably fuller than that provided in the "Note on Sources" should read "On the 80th Anniversary of Trotsky's Assassination—What If He Had Lived?" (*New Politics*, August 20, 2020).

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