A Hostile Biography of Leon Trotsky

Robert Service. Trotsky: A Biography. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 600 pages, including end notes, bibliography, index. $35.00. Robert Service’s study is quite readable. The prose is clear, and the story interesting. It follows the basic outline sketched by Trotsky himself in his literary masterpiece My Life, supplemented by Isaac Deutscher’s brilliant trilogy – The Prophet Armed, The Prophet Unarmed, and The Prophet Outcast. This provides a coherent structure, which Service seeks in a workman-like manner to compress into a more succinct, relatively fast-paced narrative, while giving it his own sharp twist to the right. In some ways — not in all, as we shall see — Service proves himself a capable historian. He spent many years researching Lenin, producing a capable if increasingly hostile three-volume political summary, “capped” by a sadly inferior (though widely lauded) biography. This has given him a fair sense of the shape of the history of the Russian revolutionary movement leading up to the 1917 Revolution. This stands him in good stead as he contextualizes much of Trotsky’s story. In addition to this, and the use of a considerable amount of secondary literature, he actually spent time mining the archives and has come up with new material. Service makes much of this archival exploration, promising new revelations supposedly culled from earlier drafts of My Life and other writings. While there are, in fact, no stunningly defamatory “revelations” forthcoming from the archives, there are insights offered from – for example – correspondence between Trotsky and his first wife Alexandra. A youthful Trotsky, imprisoned for revolutionary activities, writes to his lover: “Mikhailovski in an article about Lassalle says that one can be more frank with the woman one loves than with oneself; this is to a certain degree true but such frankness is possible
only in a personal conversation but not always, only in special and exceptional circumstances.” Engaging with such correspondence, Service comments aptly: “Then and later he favored extreme images and striking turns of phrase. This was no artificial invention. It flowed from the personality of someone who did not feel alive unless he could communicate with others.” (52, 53) A Remarkable Sloppiness At the same time, there is a remarkable sloppiness that crops up in this book. For example, Service speculates that Trotsky’s father hired a rabbi to teach his young son the Torah (24) – but his source is the short account by Max Eastman in Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth, which makes it clear that the father hired a private tutor – one who had a beard, to be sure, but who was an agnostic scholar, not a rabbi. This matches the relatively secular inclinations that Service acknowledges were characteristic of Trotsky’s father. It is odd that, with no more evidence to cite than Eastman, Service converts this into Jewish religious instruction. At times, his “facts” are simply wrong. Service tells us that Trotsky “spoke out against ‘individual terror’ in 1909 when the Socialist-Revolutionaries murdered the police informer Evno Azev, who had penetrated their Central Committee.” (113) But this is impossible. Azev most definitely was a police spy who held a position of immense authority within the Socialist-Revolutionary organization: coordinating the terrorist assassinations carried out by the Socialist-Revolutionaries. This was a tactic which Trotsky and other Marxists of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party absolutely opposed. But Azev himself, after being exposed, escaped to Germany, where he was imprisoned until 1917 and apparently died of kidney disease in 1918. Why would Trotsky denounce a murder that never happened? Of course he didn’t. But it certainly undermines one’s confidence in Service’s ability to get things right. There are also examples of important facts being left out. One of the most disconcerting comes up in Service’s seemingly detailed account of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. The Bolshevik Revolution had come to power promising “peace, bread, land.”
One of the highest priorities for the new Soviet government was to extricate Russia from the devastation of the First World War, with Trotsky as the chief peace negotiator with the Germans, “moving like a weaver’s shuttle between Brest-Litovsk and the Russian capital,” as Service nicely phrases it. (208) The German military sought to impose a very nasty settlement, which the revolutionaries were loathe to accept. Some argued for waging “revolutionary war” against German imperialism while Lenin insisted that the regime must sign the German peace terms, however odious. Trotsky took a middle position—“neither peace nor war”—in hopes that through drawing the negotiations out and peppering them with widely-publicized revolutionary speeches, the proletarian ferment visible in Central Europe would be transformed into workers’ uprisings. Service notes that Trotsky first won a majority (even the anxious and skeptical Lenin went along). But then, he tells us, Lenin somehow—presumably through persuasive conversations and lobbying among his comrades—was finally able to secure a majority for making peace. How did this happen? What Service inexplicably fails to mention is that the German military, losing patience, launched a massive and successful offensive which demonstrated the hollowness of the “revolutionary war” notion and the inadequacy of Trotsky’s compromise position. The German High Command then put forward even more odious demands which Lenin now had little difficulty persuading a majority to accept. There are additional, surprising examples of minor sloppiness. For example, André Breton, the poet and theorist of surrealism who sympathized with Trotsky, is consistently but incorrectly identified as a “surrealist painter.” (399, 453, 461) The anti-Trotskyist Bertram Wolfe is mistaken for Trotsky adherent Bernard Wolfe (441). At one point Service tells us: “Instead of calling his first son after his own father, he and Natalya had chosen the name Sergei.” (201) But of course Sergei Sedov was the second son and Lev Sedov the first, as Service himself documents elsewhere in the book. The Story Service Does Not Tell Regardless of one’s political standpoint, serious engagement
with Trotsky’s life and ideas generally results in one being more profoundly and positively impressed than Service would have us be. Christopher Hitchens – breaking from Trotskyist and revolutionary perspectives, and tacking closer to the Hoover Institution’s conservative orientation – has not been able to stop himself from insisting, in a recent debate with Service, that Trotsky was “a person of immense moral and physical courage . . . who . . . wrote pamphlets and made speeches against the menace of Hitlerism, which are much better and were made much earlier than any of Winston Churchill's.” Irving Howe, an former Trotskyist who avoided tacking quite so far rightward, felt compelled to insist thirty years ago that Trotsky “must be regarded as one of the great writers of his time,” and went on to insist that “had Trotsky’s advice been followed … the world might have been spared some of the horrors of our century; at the very least, the German working class would have gone down in battle the than allowing the Nazi thugs to take power without resistance.” But this is not the story that Service wants to tell. There is a significant amount of anti-Trotsky editorializing in this book, especially concentrated in the introductory and concluding sections, but interlarded as sniping assertions, speculations, and projections throughout. The book’s purpose, Service insists, “is to dig up the buried life” of a man whose “self-serving account of Stalin and Stalinism deeply influenced the discourse of writers both left and right,” but who had himself demonstrated a “lust for dictatorship and terror,” and, in fact, positively “reveled in terror.” (The faint-hearted need not fear – the book never really presents such raw lust and reveling!) Trotsky’s character, according to Service, involved the following traits, to take some of those offered in the book’s index: alienating others, arrogance, aversion to sentimentality, bossiness, careless about people’s attitudes to him, dislike of losing at games, egotism, impatience with stupidity, insensitivity, perfectionism, prickliness, Puritanism, temper, vanity, self-centered, will to dominate. (4, 499, 497, 597)
Nor is this all wrong. Isaac Deutscher also affirmed that Trotsky sometimes displayed a “prickly and overbearing character and a lack of talent for teamwork.” Trotsky’s Bolshevik comrade Anatoly Lunacharsky offered an acidly frank pen-portrait in 1923: “His colossal arrogance and an inability or unwillingness to show any human kindness or to be attentive to people, the absence of that charm which always surrounded Lenin, condemned Trotsky to a certain loneliness.” Others, including Service, indicate that Trotsky could indeed show kindness and great charm, and that over time he mellowed somewhat – and yet these less endearing characteristics never vanished. From the archives he digs out correspondence to Trotsky’s second wife Natalya from Lev Sedov, Trotsky’s capable revolutionary-activist son, complaining in 1936 “that all of Papa’s failings are getting worse with age: his intolerance, hot temper, teasing, even crudity and desire to offend,” and that “Papa never recognizes when he’s in the wrong. That’s why he can’t bear criticism. When something is said or written to him with which he disagrees he either ignores it entirely or gets back with a harsh reply.” (230, 431-432) Yet other qualities that Lunacharsky stressed also persisted – “the remarkable coherence and literary skill of his phrasing, the richness of imagery, scalding irony, his soaring pathos, his rigid logic, clear as polished steel,” and the fact that “there is not a drop of vanity in him, he is totally indifferent to any title or to the trappings of power.” And yet, Lunacharsky concluded, “Trotsky treasures his historical role and would probably make any personal sacrifice . . . in order to go down in human memory surrounded by the aureole of a genuine revolutionary leader.” (Some see this latter quality as a flaw, others as a strength.) While there is overlap between much of this and aspects of Service’s description, essential elements in his negative characterization (charges of hypocrisy, ingrained authoritarianism, “reveling in terror”) seem to flow from the author’s desire to turn people against a serious consideration of Trotsky’s orientation, not from the research he has done.
It precedes that research and is rooted in his ideological and institutional commitments. While Service is not up-front about his own politics, in the first sentence of the book’s preface he forthrightly describes the Hoover Institution as his “base.” For many years it has been widely known for its conservative orientation, and Service enjoys the status of a highly esteemed Senior Fellow there. Service and the Hoover Institution The Hoover Institution’s mission statement affirms “the principles of individual, economic, and political freedom; private enterprise; and representative government were fundamental to the vision of the Institution's founder,” the conservative U.S. President Herbert Hoover, who believed deeply in laissez-faire capitalism. “By collecting knowledge, generating ideas, and disseminating both, the Institution seeks to secure and safeguard peace, improve the human condition, and limit government intrusion into the lives of individuals.” The influence on Service of this perspective was suggested during his Trotsky debate with Christopher Hitchens at the Hoover Institution itself. “With a centralized state-run economy,” he argued, even with “a somewhat more astute character such as Trotsky, . . . it was an absolute certainty that you couldn't . . . get the kind of results that you wanted for popular consumption such as you can have under a market economy.” Nonetheless, the power of the historical record compels Service to tell us what Trotsky and other revolutionaries actually thought and attempted and accomplished. In describing the months leading up to the October/November Revolution of 1917, describing the process of convergence of the most committed revolutionaries into the Bolshevik party, he gives a true sense of the realities. He quotes the future Bolshevik Moisei Uritsky who was powerfully impressed (as were many) by Trotsky, freshly returned from exile and showing himself to be one of the most eloquent, passionate, brilliant mass orators: “Here’s a great revolutionary who’s arrived and one gets the feeling that Lenin, however clever he may be, is starting to fade next to the genius of Trotsky.” Service writes: Lenin felt no worry
about having personal rivals on the political far left. He needed and wanted active, talented associates such as Trotsky. He and Trotsky agreed on a broad agenda for revolution in Russia. The Provisional Government had to be done away with and a “workers’ government” instituted. The era of European socialist revolution had arrived. The Great War would be terminated only when the far leftists came to power and repudiated capitalism, imperialism, nationalism and militarism. There had to be immediate basic reform in Russia. The peasantry should take over the land of the Imperial family, the state and the Orthodox Church. Workers should control the factories. . . . All spoke approvingly of the power of the masses. There was agreement that workers and peasants should be encouraged to remake life as they wanted. Factories, offices and farms ought to be reorganized. Differences remained among Bolsheviks — and they were about to be brought to the surface the moment the party seized power. But between February and October the disputes were containable. . . . [T]he Provisional Government [of pro-capitalist and moderate socialist politicians] had to be overthrown in favor of a revolutionary administration. Fundamental social and economic reform would then be implemented. The European war would be brought to an end. Revolution in Russia would be followed by the overturning of the ruling classes throughout Europe. Failure to act would be a disaster. The counter-revolutionary elements in the former Russian Empire were waiting for their opportunity to strike. (167-169) All of this gives a good sense of how things were — in the thinking of Lenin, Trotsky, and others who rallied to make the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The problem with this, from Service’s standpoint (and that of the Hoover Institution), is that the revolutionary socialist goals are simply impossible to achieve. Presumably, the only reasonable path involves supporting private enterprise and limiting government intrusion into our social life, as explained in the Hoover mission statement. Violation of such strictures results in chaos, and as a consequence would-be revolutionaries, still
determined to force their ideals onto an unwilling society, inevitably construct a totalitarian order. This defines the story that Service feels he must tell. Contrary to the expectations of Lenin and Trotsky, and despite the upwelling of global insurgencies, socialist revolutions of the workers and peasants were not triumphant outside of Russia. The isolation of this vast but backward country in a hostile capitalist world, the brutalization of World War I and the Russian Civil War, the destructive impact of all these factors on the Russian economy combined with the revolutionaries’ own mistakes and managerial inexperience – the result being a horrendous crisis, dramatically eroding popular confidence in the revolutionary regime. A “temporary” Communist party dictatorship was consequently established to secure stability until the Soviet republic could be rescued by the “imminent” World Revolution that never quite materialized. Many revolutionaries died or de-radicalized in the five years after 1917, although both idealistic and opportunistic elements from the larger population flocked to the new party in power. In many cases, the surviving Communists and newer Communists – if they were not in the “rank-and-file” – became corrupted with their exclusive access to power and privilege. Lenin died in the midst of the crisis, in alliance with Trotsky pushing against the expanding, increasingly privileged party-and-state bureaucracy that ruled in the name of Communism. Lenin’s last struggle was too little, too late. It fell to Trotsky to become the primary spokesman and symbol of the Left Opposition. There were earlier left-wing oppositional currents which Trotsky and Lenin had short-sightedly helped vanquish. There would also be later ones – the more frightened and ineffectual “Right Opposition” led by Nikolai Bukharin, and the more militant yet hopeless stirrings associated with Mikhail Riutin. But Trotsky’s opposition – whatever its limitations and contradictions – represented the most impressive, consistent, persistent alternative to the bureaucratic tyranny and murderous policies that triumphed under Stalin. After its thoroughgoing defeat in the late
1920s, and particularly after his expulsion from the Soviet Union, Trotsky sought to build up a principled revolutionary current in the world Communist movement (the parties associated with the Communist International, or Third International). When he concluded that the bureaucratic dictatorship in the Soviet Union could be replaced by democratic soviets of the workers and peasants only through a revolutionary overthrow, he drew those from various countries who agreed with him into the small but uncompromising Fourth International, whose small parties and grouplets sought to provide “a stainless banner” to the workers and the oppressed, in hopes that the anticipated new wave of wars and revolutions would draw masses of workers and oppressed peoples to the revolutionary Marxist, Bolshevik-Leninist perspective that he and his comrades sought to preserve. Service’s attitude toward all of this is marked by utter contempt, asserting again and again that Trotsky “shared many of Stalin’s assumptions,” specifically: “He called for state economic planning and offered nothing that was essentially different from Soviet practices except the assurance that he would do things less violently and more democratically.” (357) It is obvious why a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution might be horrified over Trotsky’s commitment to state economic planning (this Trotsky certainly did share with Stalin), but one wonders at Service’s dismissive attitude toward making economic planning less violent and more democratic. Trotsky and NEP: Service’s Misinformation Unfortunately, one of the many bits of misinformation conveyed in this biography is Service’s assertion that Trotsky, “in his autobiography of 1930 would represent himself as a constant critic of the basic official measures introduced in the 1920s,” particularly the concessions to market economics represented by the New Economic Policy (NEP) which stretched from 1921 to 1928. Service correctly points out: “Trotsky never called for the NEP to be abandoned even while calling for certain features to be modified or removed. He accepted that the Soviet economy would require a private sector for the foreseeable future.”
The problem with what Service says is that Trotsky indicates the same in his 1930 autobiography. There he notes that Stalin and other critics in the Communist Party leadership “discovered that my stand at the time was one of ‘under-appreciation of the peasantry,’ and one almost hostile toward the New Economic Policy. This was really the basis of all the subsequent attacks on me. In point of fact, of course, the roots of the discussion were quite the opposite…” When Lenin “shaped the first and very guarded theses on the change to the New Economic Policy,” Trotsky continued (and Service documents), “I subscribed to them at once.” Lenin and Trotsky favored, for this period, a form of mixed economy under workers’ control (until new possibilities of socialist development would be opened by workers’ revolutions in more advanced industrial countries). At the same time, the two agreed to “a bloc against bureaucracy in general,” as Trotsky put it in his autobiography. This was to become a key pillar in the program of Trotsky’s Left Opposition, sustained when he joined with others (including Gregory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, for a time Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaya) in what came to be known as the United Opposition. “The Leningrad workers were aroused by the political trend in favor of the rich peasants – the so-called kulaks – and a policy aimed at one-country socialism.” This attitude was certainly embraced by the Opposition. But never was it advanced in opposition to the basic measures represented by NEP – nor does Trotsky seek to give this impression in his autobiography. Another key pillar of Trotsky’s program, while leading the Left Opposition and afterward, was continuing (in the spirit of Lenin’s Bolsheviks) to tie the fate of the Soviet Union to the spread of socialist revolutions to other countries. Service complains that in his revolutionary internationalism Trotsky “offered no analysis of how far he was willing to risk the existence of the Soviet state.” (357) Here again it is the biographer, not Trotsky, who seems to be at one with Stalin, who insisted that – regardless of what happened with the world revolution, the Communist regime could and should focus on building “socialism
in one country.” Trotsky – like all Marxists up to the 1920s – understood that socialism could not be built in a single economically backward country. The ability of the workers and peasants of Russia to move forward to a better life, and to the thoroughgoing economic democracy that socialism was supposed to be, was dependent on their moving forward on the same path as, and receiving life-giving assistance from, the working classes making socialist revolutions in the more advanced industrial countries. Naturally, the anti-colonial revolutions in Asia and Africa would also be essential to bringing down global capitalism. Insurgencies in the “backward” regions would feed insurgencies in the “advanced” economic centers – which would then further assist the march of progress in the “backward regions. This had been the whole point of devoting so much time and energy and resources to building up the Communist International and its member parties. Revolutionary Internationalism: Too Difficult for Service to Grasp The fact that Service (along with many others) doesn’t quite “get it” is suggested in the way he discusses Trotsky’s revolutionary internationalism, especially in the post-1917 period. It is almost as if one were discussing fashion, rather like one’s taste for “political correctness” or one’s taste in ties: “Trotsky remained a vigorous internationalist. He wrote endlessly about the need for revolution in Europe and Asia. This too was hardly an unusual standpoint to take in the first years after the October revolution, but Trotsky held to it with remarkable firmness. . . . He remained averse to either extolling or deprecating the qualities of particular peoples and believed that this was the proper approach of a Marxist.” (207) This last comment is true but beside the point. Quite simply, without the triumph of revolutionary internationalism, the revolution in Russia would be defeated. In a later attempt to get it right, Service opines that the reason for building “a fresh global organization dedicated to bringing down capitalism and promoting revolution,” the Communist International, was rooted in the concern that “so long as they
ruled the sole extreme-left European state they would remain a likely target for attack by a coalition of capitalist powers.” This conception was shared by Stalin and his temporary ally Nikolai Bukharin in the mid-to-late 1920s. But Trotsky responded: “The capitalist world shows us by its export and import figures that it has other instruments of persuasion than those of military intervention.” Against them he quoted Lenin: “So long as our Soviet Republic remains an isolated borderland surrounded by the entire capitalist world, so long will it be an absolutely ridiculous fantasy and utopianism to think of our complete economic independence and of the disappearance of any of our dangers.” Warning against the notion that “the USSR can perish from military intervention but never from its own economic backwardness,” he insisted that so long as the Soviet Union existed within a global capitalist economy, it would not be possible for it to achieve socialism. This had been a perspective shared by Lenin and the early Bolsheviks — but the new bureaucratic power elite crystallizing around Stalin, denying any break with Lenin’s thought, embraced the notion that it was possible to achieve “socialism in one country.” In The Revolution Betrayed, Trotsky deepened his analysis by referring to the perspective advanced by Karl Marx nine decades earlier: “A development of the productive forces is the absolutely necessary practical premise [of Communism], because without it want is generalized, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means that all the old crap must revive.” The reference to “all the old crap” is to brutal competition, inequality, exploitation, oppression — qualities that characterized Stalin’s version of “socialism” no less than capitalism. Trotsky elaborated: The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the
starting point of the Soviet bureaucracy. It “knows” who is to get something and who has to wait. None of this comes through in the dozen sentences that Service devotes to The Revolution Betrayed, the 1936 culmination of more than a decade of analytical effort and one of the keystones of Trotsky’s theoretical heritage. He remains remarkably dismissive of the passionate critique that the object of his biography advances through the 1930s. “The bureaucracy can no longer uphold its position in any other way than by undermining the foundations of economic and cultural progress,” according to Trotsky. “The struggle for totalitarian power resulted in the annihilation of the best men of the country by its most degraded scoundrels.” His proposal was for a political revolution initiating the following changes: “the establishment of the widest Soviet democracy and the legalization of the struggle of parties; the liquidation of the never-changing bureaucratic caste by electing all functionaries; the mapping out of all economic plans with the direct participation of the population itself and in its interests; the elimination of the crying and insulting gaps of inequality; the liquidation of ranks, orders, and all other distinctions of the new Soviet nobility; a radical change of external politics in the spirit of principled internationalism.” In the face of all this and more, Service shrugs: “He was no more likely than Stalin to create a society of humanitarian socialism even though he claimed and assumed he would. … His confident assaults on Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s distracted attention from the implausibility of his own alternative strategy.” (497) The reason for this, apparently, was the authoritarian role he had played in the crisis of civil war and economic collapse from 1918 to 1922. “The Bolshevik party had treated even workers and peasants savagely whenever they engaged in active opposition,” Service writes. “Trotsky’s earlier ideas about ‘proletarian’ self-liberation were like old coins that had dropped unnoticed out of his pocket.” (267) For seriously revolutionary-minded people, Trotsky’s trajectory in these years raises important questions – but for Service it slams
all doors firmly shut. He seems to use what happened in this intense five-year period to dismiss everything that Trotsky thinks, says and does afterward, and to question all that went before. Contrasting Service and Deutscher This is in stark contrast to the interpretation offered by Deutscher, who comments that “in the first half of 1922 Trotsky still spoke primarily as the Bolshevik disciplinarian; in the second half he was already in conflict with the disciplinarians,” coming “closer to the Workers Opposition and kindred groups” – not accepting what he believed to be utopian, unrealistic aspects of their positions, but “acknowledging the rational side of their revulsion against authority. … He began to protest against the excesses of centralism as these made themselves felt. . . . He clashed with the party ‘apparatus’ as the apparatus grew independent of the party and subjected party and state to itself.” Deutscher emphasizes what he perceives as the growing cleavage between “the power and the dream” – and the deepening contradiction felt by the Bolsheviks who had created a machine of power to make the dream a reality. “They could not dispense with power if they were to strive for the fulfillment of their ideals; but now their power came to oppress and overshadow their ideals.” Deutscher added: “Nobody had in 1920-1 gone farther than Trotsky in demanding that every interest and aspiration should be wholly subordinated to the ‘iron dictatorship.’ Yet he was the first of the Bolshevik chiefs to turn against the machine of that dictatorship when it began to devour the dream.” Service will have none of this. But he does not succeed in providing a persuasive and coherent alternative perspective. Rejecting both the dream and the power, he can find no redeeming qualities in the subject to which he devotes more than 500 pages. 1. Max Eastman, Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth (New York: Greenberg, 1925), 26-27. 2. Nurit Schleifman, “Azef, Evno Fishelevich (1869-1918),” The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution, ed. by Harold Shukman (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1988), 303-304. 3. Trotsky Per Hitchens and Service,” July 28, 2009, http://www.hoover.org/multimedia/uk/52383062.html.. 4.