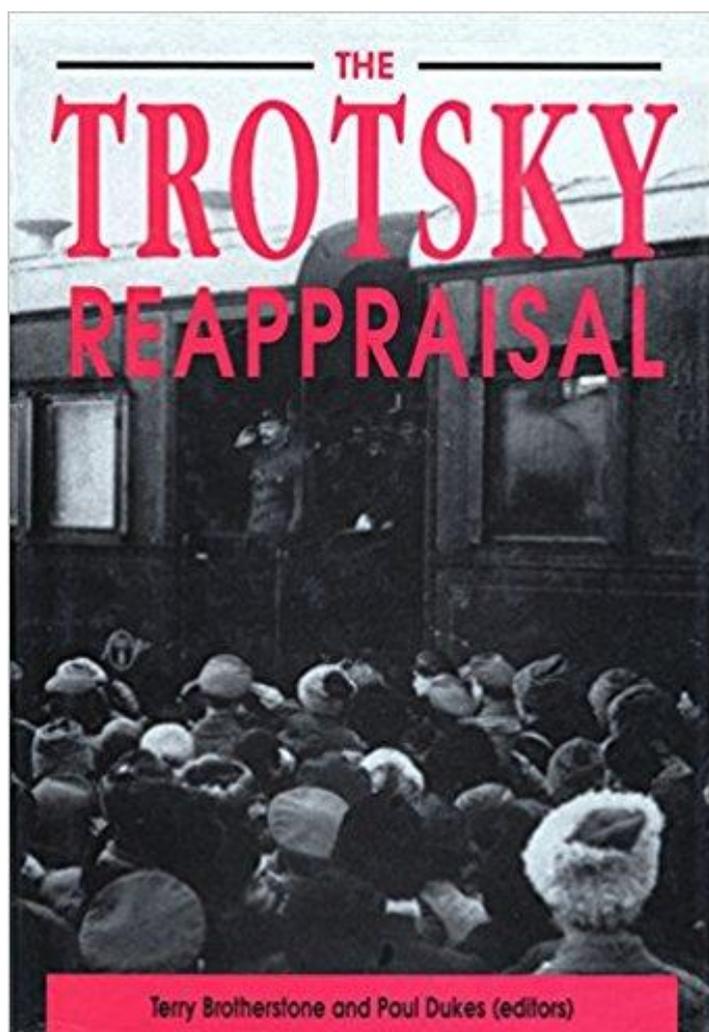


## *The Trotsky Reappraisal*



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

*The Trotsky Reappraisal*. Edited by Terry Brotherstone and Andrew Dukes. Translations by Brian Pearce, Jenny Brine and Andrew Drummond. Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 1992.

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This book grew out of a conference about Trotsky in Aberdeen in August 1990. Many of the included essays in this book were papers read there. In the preface the editors say that this book has flaws, is not the last word or the definitive statement, but means to excite controversy and criticism. Good! This modesty and openness to debate are not typical of Trotskyism. The editors also stress Trotsky's importance and that he has been misunderstood, true enough, but one misunderstanding is in the way that they perceive him. Even so, this non-sectarian attitude is refreshingly welcome and seems to make it clear the editors are not hard-core Trotskyists. Most contributors are academics who write with at least some sympathy for Trotsky and agreement with his ideas – as they know of them.

Therein lies a major problem.



*Trotsky addressing the troops during the civil war*

Although there are several worthwhile things in this book, the overall impression quickly develops that it is not what the title promises. The opening of the Soviet archives in the late 1980s, the date of publication, the title and the dust jacket blurb all suggested that this was going to be a fresh look at one of

history's most over-rated and whitewashed figures. Instead even the few criticism of Trotsky do not go far enough. With some modifications and more subtlety than is usual in Trotskyist publications many of the essays in this collection are still essentially in line with Trotskyist theories. There are several essays that are more writings for the image that many (including Trotsky) have been presenting since the 1920s. In this image Trotsky once again appears as the universal genius as the embodiment of the Russian Revolution of 1917: the genuine inheritor of Marx and Lenin, the prophet of the socialist future, the humane alternative to his enemy and nemesis Stalin. The world's most successful communist appears in Trotskyist and New Left culture as someone very different to Trotsky. By reappraisal the editors and writers seem to mean that they are reappraising the image of Trotsky developed by the Stalinists.

Assuming that these favourable views about Trotsky presented here are as sincerely held does not change an essential fact. Whatever the writers intend or do not intend, writings and biographies that put forward a favourable legend of Trotsky are used by various Communist groups to lure young idealists and the desperate into their groups. Once in, they are exploited by their leaders for all they can get using brainwashing, sleep deprivation, emotional blackmail, and isolation from the world outside the party. Bank accounts are emptied, credit cards filled, possessions sold and people are worked beyond exhaustion. When one of Australia's leading veteran Trotskyists was asked why recruits into Trotskyism were exploited so badly this ageing brat responded with cheery sadistic glee: "As everybody wakes up to Trotsky sooner or later they are exploited for all they can get while they are in [the groups]." This individual, a university failure, had it in for successful students, his favourite recruiting target. Historians do have responsibilities to their readers: clearly they should have nothing to do with this recruiting process. *The Trotsky Reappraisal*, despite some criticisms of Trotsky, remains essentially not a book to help people wake up to the reality of the man, his ideas, communism, or the assorted Trotskyist groups, most of whom would leave any part of the world they got control of strongly resembling Pol Pot's Cambodia.

A close examination of Trotsky's years in power reveals that he was as tyrannical, vainglorious, deceitful, sanctimonious, arrogant, brutal and ambitious as Stalin. He was a mass murderer of those who supported the 1917 revolution and if his killings and enslavements in the camps were fewer than Stalin's, this was because Trotsky ruled for a much shorter time and only over the Red Army, not the entire Soviet State. Until Stalin ruled no one repressed the Russian working class more than Trotsky. Not even the Czar carried out summary executions of workers for going on strike. Trotsky intended that his

plans to militarise labour, making the workers essentially enslaved under martial law were meant to last a generation at least. Trotsky was not the great economic or military genius he made himself seem. The man who did so much to turn the Russian Revolution of 1917 into a nightmare writing a book called *The Revolution Betrayed* remains one of the twentieth century's greatest acts of hypocrisy. Like Stalin, nothing he said or wrote can be taken at face value, both men were very clever and deceitful writers.

In a book of 249 pages only brief mentions concerning these aspects of Trotsky's career appear and too often they appear only to be dismissed as claims by counter communists. One well known execution of a party member on Trotsky's orders is mentioned and then dismissed with a comment that such things happen in all wars. Isaac Deutscher's belief that Trotsky's threats of execution for Bolsheviks were taken literally when they were only bluff gets repeated without acknowledging the source. The supposed lack of evidence about executions in the archives is given as support for this. By mistake Stalin allowed Trotsky to take two truckloads of documents into exile and the documents would be reprinted in two volumes of standard print of this size suggests that many of these documents have gone missing. The way Trotsky's eldest son went through his father's papers destroying anything damaging is mentioned by Trotsky's secretary but does not get a mention in *The Trotsky Reappraisal*. Even so, his son missed several important documents that strongly suggest Trotsky was not bluffing. They also show that his great military reputation was definitely not based in primary sources from the time, but his penchant for violence, ruthless bullying, control and megalomania were. Who else but a megalomaniac would plan to gallop across the Hindu Kush and successfully invade India with a few cavalry divisions?

Even so there is much here that damages Trotsky's reputation: talk of the need for 'blood and iron,' megalomaniac plans where he decides how millions will live and his cruel edicts all appear, but not what they reveal. One writer gives one very important, succinct 1920s quote about dictatorship from Trotsky. This statement appears as so blatantly totalitarian, so repressive to ordinary life, so arrogant and so chilling that even Stalin or Hitler would have probably backed off from this obvious defence of megalomaniac methods. Like most megalomaniacs this statement comes with a justification because it will lead to utopia.

Not included are detailed assessments of the accounts of eyewitnesses, prominent amongst them are Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Voline, Gregory and Olga Maximov, Peter Arshinov and Nestor Makhno. All of them

quote from Bolshevik documents which show that Trotsky was a brutal, ruthless mass murderer and a suppressor of workers' basic rights. Recent work in the Soviet archives show that counter to what is written in *The Trotsky Reappraisal*, Trotsky had a good deal to do with the thousands of executions that went on secretly after the Kronstadt Rebellion. The Ukrainian Makhnovite movement were initially Bolshevik allies who were shipping food to the starving cities, were betrayed, attacked and exterminated on Trotsky's orders, but Trotsky said very little about that and even less is said here. Another area not discussed involving opened archives is in Britain. Scholars working in the British Secret Service archives show that the great radical revolutionary and supposed anti-imperialist was eager to deal with the imperialist powers to hold on to power in Russia.

Bias, even to the point of being entranced with Trotsky, is the major problem with many of the essays in this book, but other flaws appear. Ignorance of what he was really like is another; a third is what is missing. The editors did regret that several essays could not be included. While that is understandable especially as Trotsky's life work and writings cover many fields, several big omissions are obvious. In his last years he said that building the Fourth International was his most important work, yet while this omission is admitted to in the conclusion, Trotsky's efforts here get one long quote from him and the Fourth Internationals get only a few in passing references. The Russian editor A. Vatlin in his 'On the Verge of a Break: Trotsky and the Comintern in 1928' correctly states that in the 1920s the Trotskyists deteriorated into a sect of left wing intellectuals and much of the blame for this was due to Trotsky's authoritarian ways. True. Considering what Trotskyists were and are like, omitting them becomes understandable, but it makes for a big blank in the topic of the future of Trotsky's ideas.

Trotsky wrote a good deal about art, culture, the 1903-1917 feud with Lenin, the politics of China, Germany, France and England, Stalin's show trials and the Spanish Civil War, these topics get at best in passing mentions. His time of exile in Siberia, where he learned to hone his journalistic skills and his last exile in Mexico, where he wrote so much, get nothing.

So what is in? After a preface and an introduction the essays are:

## 2 'Stalin and Trotsky's Relatives in Russia.'

Written by one of Trotsky's descendants, this contains useful information about Trotsky's family and what happened to them. Some were political, some were

not. Most were shot or died in the prisons Trotsky had done so much to establish decades before.

### 3 'Trotsky: a Biographer's Problems.'

This contains speculation about the Soviet archives, problems with primary sources and where new information leads. It briefly refers to a few examples of his ruthlessness and tyrannical behaviour in a dismissive way.

4 'Trotsky's Train: an Unknown Page in the History of the Civil War.' This gives interesting and valuable information about the train and its purposes. Trotsky's more merciful proclamations and others which are described as cruel and shows to be dictatorial are both reproduced.

### 5 'Trotsky and the Struggle for "Lenin's Heritage."'

This essay focuses on Trotsky's position in the Bolshevik Party between 1917 and 1923, his policies in relation to war communism and the power blocs within the party at that time. Both Lenin and Trotsky come in for some criticism.

### 6 'On the Verge of a Break: Trotsky and the Comintern in 1928.'

This essay does *not* focus on the beginnings of the break between the Trotskyist and Stalinist factions in the communist movement, although it does refer to those matters. What it does examine is the Russian aspects of the dispute in 1928 and the Russian leaders concerns about the international movement. The nature of power politics, Trotsky, and his followers all come in for some shrewd and justified criticisms here.

### 7. 'Trotsky and Ryutin: from the history of the anti-Stalin resistance in the 1930s.'

This important essay contains strong evidence from the Soviet archives' primary sources to show that the image of a fanatical, obedient, thoroughly Stalinised Communist Party upheld by loyal Russian workers must be incorrect. From the early 1920s until soon after Sergi Kirov's murder in December 1934 discontent with, and even hostility to Stalin was more widespread than

previously believed. Ryutin, until the late 1920s a strong Stalinist, had much to do with this. Trotsky, despite his foreign exile, was also heavily involved. This essay also demonstrates that Trotsky was correct in the essential idea that until the great purges he had much more support and potential support in the Soviet Union than previously supposed. It also shows that Stalin, while fabricating evidence and falsely lining up his opponents as terrorists and fascists, was not totally delusional. He did indeed have disaffected critics and enemies within the Soviet Union, even if he lied about them and their methods, even if their enmity and their criticisms were well justified.

#### 8. 'LD. Trotsky and the Second World War.'

The focus in this generally admiring work is on Trotsky's writings and thoughts about the role of Stalinist Russia. What was new information in 1990, which is given here, shows that Stalin was much more acquiescent to Nazi requests than previously believed before the archives were opened. His 1942 offer to join Hitler against the Allies remains unmentioned. Trotsky predicted much about the war correctly, although as this essay and the next essay shows, while he saw that America and England would dominate the world after fascism was crushed, he was also very wrong about many other matters in the post-war world.

#### 9. 'Trotsky: October and its Perspective.'

This essay covers several aspects – Trotsky's background as a revolutionary, his dedication to the idea of world revolution, his 1920s economic adaptation to the isolated Bolshevik victory in Russia and some of his thoughts for the future.

#### 10. Between Hegel and Habermas: the Political Theory of Leon Trotsky.'

This essay of fourteen pages examines the interrelationship between consciousness and nature, the idea of property, the concepts of the state and society in relationship to property and how Marx, Engels, Lenin Trotsky and Stalin viewed such matters – and where they differed. There are ideas about the community, communications, democracy and the media. Unfortunately as this was written in 1990 the massive changes in technology since then are not taken into account. This essay also takes at face value the old idea that Trotsky wanted to democratise Soviet Russia and have a healthy decision making role for the unions and their workers. This is based on his statements from the middle of the 1920s – after he lost the power struggle to Stalin. This was also

after Soviet Russia had been bureaucratised, largely due to his efforts and after he needed policies which differentiated him from Stalin. Once again the idea that genuine democracy could not emerge in backward peasant based Russia gains expression. As usual when this idea appears, no mention appears of Trotsky's role in viciously and thoroughly exterminating every attempt by the peasantry to establish more democratic societies.

#### 11. 'Trotsky and the Russian Social Democratic Controversy over Comparative Revolutionary History.'

The focus here is how in the years 1902 to 1907, Trotsky, Lenin and assorted Mensheviks assessed the developing revolutionary potential within Russia. They frequently compared it to earlier European revolutions, which readers need to know a good deal about before reading this piece.

#### 12. 'Trotsky's Conception of the Revolutionary Process'

The broad pattern of revolutions and how they cannot fulfil all their initial utopian expectations is the basis for this essay. This idea is applied to the Russian revolution and how Trotsky perceived the problem and what he saw as the solutions.

#### 13 'The Defence of Terrorism: Trotsky and his Major Critics.'

Karl Kautsky and John Dewey both engaged in polemics with Trotsky about the use of terror in the new Soviet state and if means justified ends. From there they argued about how means shaped ends, altering them. This essay works as an effective introduction to this debate.

#### 14. 'Trotsky and Martov.'

This is more about what Trotsky wrote about Martov than about what the two men thought of each other or how they worked together at one stage. Sensibly speculation appears about what motivated Trotsky's dislike, rather just repeating his dogmatic opinions which are not the facts they seem to be.

#### 15. 'Trotsky and Black Nationalism.'

Trotsky wrote very little on this topic before 1933 and only a little after that date. He confessed his ignorance, which was wise, as to give one example, he thought American Blacks spoke a separate language. His writings are mainly concerned with advising South African and American Trotskyists about linking the struggle for Blacks to the proletarian revolution.

#### 16. 'Trotsky and NEP.'

Trotsky is usually depicted as either hostile towards Russia's New Economic Policy of 1921-1928 or sullenly tolerating it due to the temporary need to rebuild Russia. This essay shows his role in establishing and perpetuating NEP was much more complex. It also contains a very important 1920s quote which shows without any ambiguity or uncertainty that Trotsky intended the dictatorship of the proletariat to be "pitiless" "coercive" state "control" over all aspects of the life of its citizens. Note the reference to citizens, not the middle class and no this was not a temporary measure designed to win the civil war. The need to win the civil war and that the formerly oppressed working class now rule are the usual justifications given by Trotskyists when somebody else refers to the reality of his rule.

#### 17. 'Trotsky's Conceptions Concerning Foreign Economic Relations.'

Trotsky's ideas and actions concerning foreign investment for economic development within Soviet Russia has received little attention, which this essay goes a long way to correcting. The Trotsky who emerges here in his own words seems a very different man to the ultra-revolutionary usually depicted. His economic ideas during the middle 1920s were not so different from those of Stalin and Bukharin as many of his followers and sympathetic historians make out.

#### 18. Trotsky's Political Economy of Capitalism.'

This contains a succinct and sympathetic summary of where Trotsky thought the world economy was in his lifetime and where it would go.

#### 19. Trotsky's Future: An Essay in Conclusion.

The writer admits here that Trotsky saw the building of the Fourth International as his most important work and that by not containing writings on that this work contains a black hole. The editor also says that since Trotsky's death Trotskyists have spent their time in splits that few follow or understand. Actually not even Trotsky was able to keep his followers united, let alone keep the former followers he once had. Trotsky as presented here appears an inspirational figure for the future, albeit one to be used with caution.



Trotsky was a charming, evasive, powerful and clever writer with a particular skill for the highly selective use of facts for his purposes. As this collection shows, he was and still is able to beguile many, just as Stalin did – but in 1956 Khrushchev's denunciations began a long period of deep disillusionment and reappraisal. Trotsky needs the same, but despite this book's title that does not happen here.

