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Review

Trotsky in Tijuana

- Reviews section -

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Books about historical topics can sometimes be a bit difficult. Often, the list of names, facts, anecdotes, and dates is so long that the reader risks getting lost. Moreover, the reasons behind events are not always very clear, nor always explained in a way that is easy to understand.

That's why it can sometimes be useful to illustrate historical developments through a "what if" approach, which highlights real events in relation to possible ones. This is what American activist and author Dan La Botz does in his book *Trotsky in Tijuana*.

Historical fact

It is an historical fact that [Lev Davidovich "Leon" Trotsky](#) was the victim of an attempted assassination on August 20, 1940, in Coyoacán, Mexico (Trotsky effectively passed away a day later). The killer—[Ramón Mercader](#)—was acting on behalf of the GPOe (Gosudarstvennoje Politicheskoe Oepravlenije; State Political Directorate), as the [secret service](#) of the Soviet Union of the USSR was known at the time. The GPOe was itself under the direct orders of the all-powerful leader of the USSR, [Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin](#). This was neither the first nor the last political assassination ordered by Stalin. By killing Trotsky, Stalin got rid of his most prominent critic.

Questions

But why was Trotsky so important and therefore so dangerous to Stalin? What criticisms did Trotsky make? How did they evolve? Are these criticisms still valid in light of the course of history? All these questions have been asked many times, and there are certainly many possible answers. Unfortunately, discussions around these questions and answers have often led to rifts and splits in the already small organizations of the so-called "Trotskyist" movement.

A striking image

Dan La Botz does not answer these and other similar questions himself in this docu-fiction, but does so through the evolution of the characters in his book *Trotsky in Tijuana*. In this "what if" story, we start from the premise that the attempted assassination of Trotsky... fails! Thanks to the intervention of the then Mexican president, the left-leaning [Lázaro Cárdenas](#), La Botz has Trotsky, his family, and his bodyguards transferred in utmost secrecy to Tijuana, a city on the border between Mexico and the United States. We won't reveal here all what happens next. But by reproducing the conversations of numerous characters, the author succeeds in giving the reader a striking image of the world as it was during the turbulent 20th century, as well as the difficulties that revolutionary Marxists were already facing at the time.

Fictional dialogues

Dan La Botz is not just any writer. He has been deeply involved in the American and Mexican left and labor movements throughout his life, about which he has written [several nonfiction books](#). The knowledge he has acquired enables him to bring his “alternative” history to life in an informative way. The invented dialogue between Trotsky and the fictional character Colonel de la Fuente, whose youth is placed in France, helps us, for example, to better understand the complex history of Mexico, a country that was itself the product of a revolution, with all the opportunities but also all the difficulties that come with it. Through the equally fictional character of Ralph Buck, we learn a great deal about the inner workings (and struggles) of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which was at the time the American section of the Fourth International. The introduction of the fictional psychoanalyst Dr. Bergman allows the author to intelligently develop the relationship between Marxists (such as Trotsky) and the ideas of Sigmund Freud, as well as attempts to integrate Freud's ideas into Marxism—think of Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm. The mention of the not-so-fictional anti-communist senator Joseph McCarthy allows La Botz to paint a concise picture of the situation in the US at the beginning of the Cold War. He does the same by linking the life of Trotsky's former collaborator, Jean van Heijenoordt (called Van in the book), to Stalin's death. The difficult relationship between Trotsky, his wife Natalia Sedova, and Victor Serge is also well described.

A man of flesh and blood

Dan La Botz's Trotsky remains the man of heroic deeds—president of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905, organizer of the successful October 1917 uprising, leader of the victorious Red Army during the civil war from 1918 to 1921, leader of the [Left Opposition](#) in the USSR since 1924 – but at the same time, La Botz's Trotsky is also a man of flesh and blood, with all the little quirks, sometimes a little ironic, that go with it: his arrogance and at the same time his almost desperate desire to be recognized; his aging and his growing loneliness, and his almost desperate desire to lose these, or at least to mitigate them, in the gaze, the embrace, and ultimately also in a relationship with a younger woman; his tragic isolation and the frustration he derives from it, often projected onto fairly innocent political “rivals.” La Botz thus portrays Trotsky as a man who, as in Marx's words, did not choose his condition, but who, with the courage of despair, nevertheless attempts to fulfill his own destiny.

Small error

Throughout the narrative, the many and considerable merits of Trotsky as a revolutionary activist are, of course, accounted for. Dan La Botz knows this history inside out and recounts it masterfully. Yet I think he has at least one time relied a little too much on his memory and made a small error. He places Trotsky's detention by the British (in Halifax and Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada) before Trotsky's arrival in New York in 1916. In reality, this detention by the British took place a year later, in March 1917, when the British government tried (unsuccessfully) to prevent his return to Russia. This small error—unless it is a case of “literary license”—fortunately does not detract from the book's captivating narrative.

Personal experience

Dan La Botz in this story also draws on his own situation, experiences, and difficulties. For example, he gradually causes his fictional Trotsky to lose his eyesight in old age due to age-related macular degeneration, an eye disease that today is still incurable. La Botz knows what he is talking about, as he suffers from the same disease, a real disaster for a militant writer.

Retrospective and assessment

But it is not only his knowledge and personal experiences that enable Dan La Botz to bring his fictional and not-so-fictional characters to life. It should also be noted that he himself is 80 years old, an age when many people take stock of their lives and try to draw conclusions. La Botz has already done this before, in an [autobiographical retrospective](#) published on the blog of the magazine *Historical Materialism*. This formal retrospective, which attempts to take stock, is complemented by this “alternative” story of the imaginary Trotsky in Tijuana. In this docu-fiction, he manages to summarize the differences of opinion and growing doubts that began to emerge within the international Trotskyist movement during, but especially after, World War II.

Differences of opinion and doubts

These differences revolve around central aspects of Trotsky's thinking, such as the viability (or otherwise) for the “global South” of the theory of [“permanent revolution”](#), the “nature” of the Soviet Union ([“degenerated workers' state”](#) or [“state capitalism”](#) or [“bureaucratic collectivism”](#)), the feasibility (or otherwise) of the [“transitional program”](#) method, and the creation and construction (desirable or not) of the Fourth International. Although he himself is a member of the American organization [Solidarity](#)—recently acknowledged as the American section of the Fourth International—La Botz does not hide his deep doubts about all these questions and others. At the same time, he knows that as an author he must respect the dignity and truthfulness of his characters, whether fictional or not. It's not easy to maintain this subtle balance, yet La Botz manages it very well.

Conclusion

Trotsky in Tijuana is an easy-to-read and informative book, without being too heavy. I recommend it especially (but not only) to young people, who may be less familiar with the history of the [“short 20th century”](#) in general and that of the revolutionary Marxist left in particular. It would therefore be a good thing if Dan La Botz's *Trotsky in Tijuana* were translated into other languages.

Trotsky in Tijuana, by Dan La Botz, is available (in English) on this [website](#).

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This review was first published on the Dutch website of the Belgian section of the Fourth International, [SAP – Antikapitalisten](#).

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