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Book review

Prophet Prolonged....?

- Reviews section -

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Dave Kellaway reviews Dan La Botz's book, Trotsky in Tijuana, published by BookLocker.com, Florida 2020.

Trotsky invites his young follower, Ramon Mercader, into his study to discuss an article. As the Old Man settled at the desk Mercader pulls out a sharpened ice pick ready to plunge it into Trotsky's skull...but at that moment a young American guard rushes from the doorway and throws the assailant to the ground. It is 21 August 1940 and Trotsky has survived another assassination attempt by a GPU agent acting on Stalin's orders.

How many supporters of Trotsky's ideas might have fantasised some such scenario and envisaged the positive consequences it may have had on the direction of the socialist movement. I remember leaders of the Trotskyist movement like Ernest Mandel suggesting that his loss in 1940 had a materially negative effect on the fortunes of the Fourth International (FI), the movement he founded in 1938. If he had survived maybe the problems and divisions that bedevilled the FI might have been overcome.

This book uses this historically counter-factual premise to build its story around an extension of Trotsky's life for another 13 years. The big political questions of the war and post war period are addressed alongside the personal and human problems of Trotsky, Natalia Sedova his partner, and his circle.

Although it is not a very common fictional/documentary literary genre, it certainly replicates the what-iffery debates that everyone interested in politics - activists, journalists or TV pundits - engages in all the time. Once you accept that history is not inevitable or written in advance then things can always have turned out differently.

The many arguments we have had with reformists, Stalinists, 'campists' or other radicals always involve alternative outcomes even though political choices, tactics and strategy take place in objective circumstances we cannot ignore. A forthcoming book, by Daniel Bensaïd, looks at a series of key historical dates in precisely this way.

Some of the best known counter-factual books or films examine what would have happened if Hitler had won the war: *Fatherland* by Robert Harris, the film *It Happened Here* by Kevin Brownlow and the more recent TV success, *The Man in the High Castle*. All of these are more than literary conceits, making political points about the social and class forces in play that are pertinent today. For example we see in the Harris book how the US ruling class were quite happy to make a deal with the fascists in a similar way that Trump is engaging with fascist militia today.

Over 80 bite-sized chapters, Dan La Botz constructs an alternative history where Trotsky continues to be helped by the progressive nationalist president of Mexico, Cardenas. He is assigned a military guard and a house in Tijuana, just across the border from San Diego. The author uses his local knowledge of both this region and of Mexico to create a detailed and colourful picture of the local context.

Several threads structure the book. One is the story of Ralph, the young guard who saves Trotsky from the ice pick written from the viewpoint of a rank and file activist. Another is the perspective from Stalin's dacha where he keeps alive his vendetta against Trotsky. A third and perhaps most successful one is a focus on Natalia and her relationship to Trotsky and his politics. To some degree La Botz rescues Natalia's story from the shadows to which it is often relegated.

But it is the political debate and efforts of Trotsky to build his Fourth International which is the meat of the book. At

times this can read a little like a political pamphlet or a party educational but it is written very accessibly for those not steeped in the heritage of the Trotskyist movement.

Inevitably the book addresses the question about whether Trotsky's survival would have dramatically improved the fate of the nascent Fourth International. It eventually concludes that it would not have made much of a difference. I am sure some will argue vehemently against this but there are lots of reasons to agree with the overall judgement.

Trotsky's position on the absolute priority of declaring the foundation of the FI was linked to his analysis that the Second World War would lead to a similar economic and revolutionary crisis that followed the First World War. He thought that the resurgent masses would rise up in the West and sweep away the bureaucratic caste in Russia, or the caste itself would be smashed by imperialism. The reinforcement of Stalinism and its increased prestige in the workers movement internationally because of its role in defeating Hitler was not really considered likely. Obviously planting the banner of the FI was more logical if you thought there would be a mass revolutionary upsurge and that the Stalinists would be completely discredited.

Harshness

Many observers have recognised Trotsky's brilliance in political analysis and practical leadership in the civil war but also a certain arrogance, narcissism and lack of what today we call emotional intelligence or empathy. We follow the discussion with Victor Serge, who had a different analysis of the Soviet Union, or with the POUM, the Spanish left group, and you are struck by the harshness of Trotsky's response, his tendency to accuse Serge or others of being petty bourgeois or intellectuals. Even his response to the Shachtman split in the US Socialist Workers Party seems partly impelled by his distrust of these critics of the degenerated workers' state theory because they were intellectuals, against the more working-class leadership of James Cannon.

Of course you can make the counter-factual argument to La Botz's counter-factual novel by arguing that the masterly way that Trotsky analysed and accurately predicted the rise of fascism in Germany would have meant that post-war reality would have drawn him away from his catastrophist scenarios. Possibly, but the book picks up in several places how weak the revolutionary vanguard and its memory was in the post-war period.

Most of the revolutionary generation that Trotsky was part of had been physically eliminated either by the fascists or the Stalinists. Lack of implantation in the mass movements by the small FI groups meant it was easier for them to stick to the 1938 version of reality. For a shift in Trotsky's position to have taken place you would have to have had people in the movement with the credibility and confidence to challenge his views. Most of the post-war leadership was relatively young and were not leaders from the mass movement.

We can also argue that those groups or currents that were opposed to declaring the FI in 1938 have not been particularly more effective at building an international network of revolutionaries. Many who broke with defence of the Soviet Union against imperialism did end up in the imperialist camp, such as James Burnham. However this is a debate that is superseded to some degree today by at least the main FI current which no longer defines their movement in the terms Trotsky did in this period as the actual existing world leadership of the proletariat. It actively seeks to build a network alongside currents coming from other traditions and includes the key dimensions of ecology and feminism.

The author skilfully uses both real and invented characters in the story. So Etienne, who was a GPU agent involved in killing Stalin's opponents in France, is given a new lease of life as he infiltrates Trotsky's household in Tijuana. His post GPU life was actually as an anthropologist called Zbromoski. Similarly Van Heijnenoort who was Trotsky's

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secretary is reborn as the organiser of a plot to kill Stalin, when in fact he ended up as a respected academic. Stalin's death is also described on the basis of a credible theory outline in a 2003 study *Stalin's Last Crime*, by Naumav and Brent.

On the other hand a psychiatrist is invented to embellish La Botz's treatment of Trotsky's personality and this works well to show how his strengths were allied to a certain coolness towards even his close associates. It is fun spotting the true bits and the fiction - Google helps here. I thought the way he ties up Stalin's decision to finally send in another assassination team with McCarthy's invitation to Trotsky to appear before his senate hearings is quite a neat and credible idea.

Trotsky in Tijuana is a great read. It is fairly races along and it allows you to get a real grasp of the key political discussions of the time while understanding the human side of Trotsky, Natalia and their circle. While critical, it is also respectful of their struggle to further human progress despite the terrible toll on their own family. All their children died before them and they lived continually under the threat of assassination.

Probably it is not the book for those Trotskyist sects that treat Trotsky like some sort of infallible guru with rent-a-quotes to fit every turn and manoeuvre of their leadership.

If you like this book do take a look, as the author himself recommends, at Leonardo Paduro's masterpiece, *The Man who Loved Dogs*, which deals with Trotsky's assassination in great detail. Barbara Kingsolver's magnificent *The Lacuna* is also quite brilliant.

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