History plays strange tricks. In 1954, one year after the death of Stalin, and at the beginning of a period of so-called “de-Stalinisation”, Isaac Deutscher published the first book in his three volume biography of Trotsky.1 Deutscher’s work, despite its many faults, gave a clear account of Trotsky’s life and struggle, and countered the Stalinist lies which, even today, are still perpetrated about the founder of the Red Army. And now, at a time when reasoned public discussion of Trotsky in the USSR is allowed for the first time in over fifty years, Pierre Broué, Professor of History and long-time member of Pierre Lambert’s Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), has published a massive new biography of Trotsky in French which both rivals and surpasses that of Deutscher.

During the 1970s the English speaking world saw the publication of a huge amount of Trotsky’s work, notably George Breitman’s edition of the Writings (1929-40),2 and material on the history of the Fourth International (FI), in the form of the American Socialist Workers Party’s (SWP) ?Towards a History of the Fourth International? series.3 At the beginning of the 1980s this situation changed. The SWP abandoned their formal adherence to Trotsky in favour of Castro and Maurice Bishop. Consequently the last volume of Trotsky’s political writings was published as long ago as 1981! 4

In France, however, an opposite process has been taking place. After several decades in which French revolutionaries were deprived of most of Trotsky’s works they now have access to the definitive edition of his writings, the ?uvres (1933-40, in 24 volumes) which include the material in the ?closed? section of Trotsky’s Harvard archives, open only since 1980. A second series, which will cover the years from 1927-33, has just begun to appear. The United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) is overseeing the publication of the resolutions of the FI from 1933. Three volumes have already been published and a fourth volume, dealing with the 1950-52 faction fight, is about to appear. This burst of activity is supplemented by a quarterly journal, Cahiers Leon Trotsky, which publishes archive material and scholarly articles on the history of Trotskyism.

Head of the Institut d’Etudes Politiques at the University of Grenoble, Professor Broué is the powerhouse behind much of the current wave of French ?Trotskyography?. He edits the ?uvres (having previously edited a major collection of Trotsky’s writings on France), heads the Institut Léon Trotsky (which publishes the Cahiers) and has supervised many of the students who have been contributing important material on the period 1927-33.

Broué’s involvement in Trotskyist politics means that his understanding of the major issues of Trotsky’s work far surpasses that of previous academic writers on Trotsky’s life and thought. Because of this, however, we also have the right to criticise Broué on a different level from that of a ?professional historian?. Broué claims to be a Trotskyist militant. Thus his biography provides us with a test not only of his ?professional? capacities but also of the implications of the life and work of his subject for political practice.

Published not by the PCI but by a bourgeois company specialising in biographies (other recent titles include Genghis Khan and William Tell), Broué’s book is an impressive work of scholarship. This of course has its negative side. As with other academic historians, Broué has a tendency to repeat the established formula for such works: i) rehash the existing literature; ii) throw in over long quotations to show that he really has read everything; iii) make some (but not too many) innovative remarks based upon original research; iv) settle a few scores with professional rivals along the way. This procedure, whilst often annoying, has nevertheless produced a study which is by far the most complete account of Trotsky’s life.
For the early period of Trotsky’s life (1879-1903), as could only be expected, Broué restricts himself to a competent synthesis of previously published biographical material, notably My Life, Natalia Sedova’s Life and Death of Leon Trotsky and Max Eastman’s The Young Trotsky. Given that these are all standard fare for those interested in Trotsky’s life little new is revealed thereby.

Trotsky’s childhood in the Ukraine, his initial struggle against Marxism—as personified by his future first wife Alexandra—his periods in prison and his entry into the revolutionary movement, are all faithfully recounted, illustrated by quotes from his writings of the time which demonstrate why he was given the nickname “The Pen” even at such a young age.

The sections dealing with 1905 and the theory of permanent revolution are also “orthodox,” in the sense that Broué tells the story in much the same way as does Trotsky in his autobiography and in his book 1905, although Broué acknowledges that he extensively used Zeman and Scharlau’s 1965 biography of Helphand (“Parvus”), the Merchant of Revolution who, together with Trotsky, originated the theory of permanent revolution as applied to the imperialist epoch. In the period after 1905, however, Broué does provide us with more detailed information than is available in Deutscher, revealing clearly both the character of Trotsky’s politics at this time, and those of his biographer.

**Revolutionary role**

Trotsky played a prominent role during the 1905 Revolution, as the president of the Petrograd Soviet. He was incredibly perceptive in his analysis of the nature of the revolution unfolding in the early weeks of 1905, which was to be repeated in its essential features in 1917. He understood that there was no prospect of a purely “democratic” revolution, either in the form of the Mensheviks’ timid proposals for a bourgeois revolution, or Lenin’s superior—but still flawed—conception of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”. He also saw far more clearly than the Bolsheviks the potential of the soviets as organs of working class power.

Nevertheless, Trotsky’s major weakness—which remained unresolved until 1917—was his complete failure to understand the centrality of the party. Following the 1903 split in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), into the Bolshevik (“majority”) and Menshevik (“minority”) tendencies, Trotsky’s initial response, in his work of 1904 Our Political Tasks, was to attack Lenin as a future dictator. That prediction has been seized upon by a whole school of unoriginal bourgeois historians—and anarchists—to place an equals sign between Leninism and Stalinism.

After the stormy year of the 1905 Revolution, and having escaped from Siberian exile at the beginning of 1907, Trotsky tried to play a role in the RSDLP between the factions, supposedly having as the focus of his activity the unification of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Living in Vienna and publishing a bimonthly newspaper, Pravda (“Truth”), Trotsky’s role was in fact far from neutral. In essence he was a left centrist waverer, opposed to Lenin’s project of a vanguard party, but reluctant to totally embrace the Menshevik’s right centrism. However, when the chips were down during these years, he did take sides, nearly always with the Mensheviks.

Broué shows how in January-February 1910, a plenum of the whole RSDLP was held in Paris, which gave rise to an apparent compromise between the two factions. The Mensheviks, however, refused to abide by the agreement, maintaining the existence of their faction and failing to expel their most liquidationist members. As a major architect of the agreement, Trotsky’s opinion of the failed fusion was of great importance. His response was to solidarise with the Mensheviks, expressing this in articles in Die Neue Zeit and Vorwärts, publications of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

This typically centrist behaviour—repeated throughout the period 1907-14—understandably outraged the Bolsheviks (and even Rosa Luxemburg, no supporter of Lenin’s conception of the party). It provoked Lenin to write some of his more blistering polemics, quotes from which were to be wrenched out of context and used in Stalin’s campaign against Trotsky from 1924 onwards. Broué describes all this in some detail. But incredibly the only opinion he himself offers is to praise Trotsky for his attempts to unify the RSDLP. The question of programme and the nature of Trotsky’s activity are never mentioned.
This period of Trotsky's life shows one of the limits of Broué's politics. The word '?centrism?' is rarely mentioned in the book, although it is frequently found in Trotsky's writings of the 1930s and aptly describes Trotsky's behaviour in the pre-war years. A critical understanding of this period of Trotsky's life is essential to a full appreciation of his subsequent political development. Broué fails, not because he misses any decisive factual evidence?he is too '?professional?' for that?but because he is politically incapable of clearly appreciating that Trotsky's positions in this period were indeed centrist.

Following the outbreak of the war, Broué traces Trotsky's exile in France and Spain, and his expulsion to New York where he met the young Bukharin for the first time and heard the wonderful news of the Russian Revolution. Broué wisely resists the temptation to re-tell the story of the 1917 revolutions, providing a concise thirty page summary of Trotsky's intervention from his return to Russia in April through to his leadership of the insurrection in November.

The subsequent chapters on Trotsky's military role in the civil war, the founding of the Red Army and negotiations at Brest-Litovsk are also useful, especially that on the Red Army, which draws heavily on Trotsky's five volume How the Revolution Armed,7 untranslated into French, and hardly widely-read in English. Broué is undoubtedly at his best when dealing with a problem which is relatively uncontroversial, which is not particularly well-known, but which is well-documented by Trotsky himself.

Political problems
As the civil war ended, the Bolsheviks were faced with new difficulties, of a different, more explicitly political, order. The economy, based on a mixture of commandeering and optimism known as ?War Communism?, was beginning to grind to a halt. The wave of famine which followed the dislocation caused by the occupying imperialist armies led to dissent within the country and the party, culminating in the debates which took place at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921, over the role of the unions, the nature of War Communism, and the anarchist-led Kronstadt rebellion, which took place at the same time.

At this Congress the Party took the decision to temporarily ban factions within the Party, a decision which was never to be rescinded and which was to be used to devastating effect by the bureaucracy shortly afterwards in the struggle against Trotsky. Broué explains these discussions, and Trotsky's role in them, extremely effectively. Particularly interesting is his, unfortunately brief, discussion of Trotsky's criticisms of War Communism in 1920, which anticipated Lenin's ?New Economic Policy? by two years.

In his recent review of Broué's book, USFI leader Ernest Mandel, has roundly attacked Broué for his treatment of this period.8 For Mandel, the key error of the Bolsheviks in this period was to have failed to understand the absolute necessity for political pluralism and for self-management of industry, a stance the USFI adopted in the 1970s. Thus he quotes Trotsky's estimation of the role of the banning of parties and factions, claiming it to be ?one of the most important self-criticisms of his political life?.9

?The prohibition of oppositional parties brought after it the prohibition of factions. The prohibition of factions ended in a prohibition to think otherwise than the infallible leaders. The police-manufactured monolithism of the Party resulted in a bureaucratic impunity which has become the source of all kinds of wantonness and corruption.? 10

The problem is that Mandel sees this as an inevitable chain of causes and consequences rather than a summatory description of what happened as a result of deep social causes. His aim is to portray Trotsky as the indefatigable champion of (bourgeois) political liberties.

Despite what this inveterate centrist would have us believe, the Russian Revolution was not doomed from the moment it denied political freedom to the bourgeois opposition, and Trotsky emphatically did not make any sort of ?self-criticism? on this question. In 1920 Trotsky explained the Bolshevik position in the pages of Terrorism and Communism, 11 in which he countered the arguments being put forward at the time by Mandel's true ancestor, Karl Kautsky. Mandel's view of the importance of freedom for all political parties?even for the bourgeoisie in a civil war(!)?receives little support either in Trotsky's original writings, or in their refraction in Broué's biography.
On the question of the banning of factions within the revolutionary party, however, there is a useful discussion to be had. As Broué shows, although the debate between the leadership and the Workers Opposition around Schliapnikov and Kollontai had taken up a great deal of the leadership's time and had particularly exasperated Lenin, the Party as a whole was still solidly loyal to the defence of the proletarian dictatorship. Nobody voted against the resolution banning factions, and a sizeable part of the Workers' Opposition who might, on the face of it, have been suspected of being the most wavering elements went straight from the Congress to join the assault on the insurrectionists at Kronstadt.

Was the decision therefore correct? Although he is prepared to spend some time dealing with the anarchists' criticisms of the Bolsheviks' suppression of Kronstadt—mainly to turn the fire away from Trotsky, it must be said—Broué does not deal with this key question which has become a touchstone for a whole series of historians of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution.

On the trade union dispute Mandel's criticism is somewhat more unusual. Broué, like Deutscher, sides with Lenin on this point, rejecting Trotsky's position. Mandel argues that the whole debate raised the question of 'who controls??, and says that whilst Lenin's reply was to leave decisions in the hands of the local managers and the Workers' Opposition argued for the unions to decide, Trotsky and Bukharin made 'decisive steps in the direction of self-management'.

But the whole thrust of Trotsky's position was towards that of greater planned central control of the economy in all its aspects. Trotsky's position on the unions caused such an uproar precisely because rather than fighting for 'self-management' in the USFI's meaning of the term (control by the workers in each plant), he argued that work norms, work discipline and even representation of the workers through their unions should be determined by the state.

As Lenin pointed out, this was correct only if one rested content with the abstraction of 'a workers' state'. One had to face the reality of the post-civil war USSR, i.e. that it was a workers' state in a backward country resting on an alliance with the peasantry to which this state was forced to make concessions. It should then be obvious that the workers required elementary forms of defence against this state's bureaucratic deformations. The workers still needed independent and democratic trade unions for this purpose as well as for their fundamental role as schools for socialism. It was the heartfelt need of the workers for such defence which raised such a storm of opposition, and led to Lenin carrying the day. The role of this dispute in undermining Trotsky's prestige with the proletariat should not be underestimated.

**Trotsky without Lenin**

One of the periods of Trotsky's life which appears with hindsight to be full of tactical errors is that of 1922-26, as the degeneration of the revolution gathered pace. For the armchair critic at the opposite end of the twentieth century, it appears that Trotsky completely misunderstood the real threat posed by Stalin, and allowed himself to be shunted into a siding of history, as he was alternately silenced by the Central Committee or took part in Byzantine debates on his exact role in the 1917 insurrection. Furthermore, he even went so far as to disavow the authenticity of Lenin's Testament, which had been published in English by one of Trotsky's followers, Max Eastman, with the support of Trotsky's friend and confidant Christian Rakovsky, a testament which was particularly damaging to Stalin.

This period is a key one for the biographer. On the one hand, the stages in the faction fight and their ultimate consequences have to be explained clearly to the reader. On the other hand, criticisms of the conduct of the various participants cannot justifiably be based on their ultimate consequences. This is obviously a difficult task, and it is one that Deutscher failed to even attempt. For him, Trotsky made a series of mistakes which were obvious even at the time, and his account of Trotsky's behaviour is largely based on psychological factors. Broué is far more aware of the danger of anachronistic criticisms, and, basing himself on a deeper understanding of the various conflicts within the Bolshevik Party, the Comintern and the USSR at the time, presents a far more convincing picture than his predecessor.

The relative isolation of Trotsky and of those who supported him, as compared to the massive resources in the hands of Zinoviev and Stalin, were a vital factor tending to limit his room for manoeuvre. Furthermore, the idea popular after the event of immediately making an alliance with Zinoviev against Stalin, ignores the fact that the main threat facing
the Russian Revolution was not Stalin, but the growth of the bureaucracy. And Stalin was not the only representative of this new bureaucratic caste.

As Broué shows, Zinoviev's bureaucratic and brutal handling of opposition within both the Comintern and the massive Leningrad Party organisation gave little reason to hope that he would be a stalwart in the fight against bureaucratism as indeed proved to be the case. Further, the third member of the all-powerful triumvirate, Kamenev, had, together with Zinoviev, been responsible for launching the defamation campaign against Trotskyism.

With a very weak base, and in a situation in which the positions of the contending forces were continually changing, Trotsky could not pursue a clear and strident policy right from the outset, no matter how much it might now seem to have been advisable. Instead, the opposition around Trotsky preached a wait and see policy, arguing that wherever alliances could be struck they should be, but that nothing should be done to unnecessarily provoke the Party and state apparatus into taking action against them.

Thus, on the question of Eastman's publication of Lenin's Testament in 1925, as E H Carr has pointed out, Trotsky was placed in a very difficult position. He could either go into battle on a relatively secondary matter, on ground which was firmly favourable to his opponents, or he could disavow his supporters and Lenin's final estimation of himself and the other Bolshevik leaders. Trotsky later wrote that he signed his disavowal upon the decision of the leading group of the Opposition. Quite how difficult his position was is shown by the tone of the letter Trotsky was forced to sign, and the thorough personal trashing it gave Eastman, for which Trotsky was apparently and understandably never forgiven.

Whilst Broué's discussion of the strictly Russian aspects of the Opposition is very thorough, his coverage of international matters is disappointing. The Bolshevisation of the Comintern under Zinoviev gets little mention, and the expulsion of two of Trotsky's friends and co-thinkers, Rosmer and Monatte, from the French section, is not even mentioned. This is all the more striking, given that Trotsky disowned their activity at the same time as he attacked Eastman, and that his influence in France was substantial, as shown by the fact that leading members of the Parti Communiste (PC) Rosmer, Monatte and Souvarine were expelled as early as 1924 for their support for him. Trotsky was obviously obliged to sacrifice his co-thinkers abroad to the needs of the decisive struggle in the USSR but the result was that after 1928-29 he was obliged to start, perhaps not from nothing, but from a weaker base than either the Zinovievites of the mid-20s or the contemporary Right Opposition.

In general, Broué's discussion of Trotsky's intervention into the Comintern does not go beyond a summary, based on the material in the First Five Years of the Communist International (much of which, however, is not available in French). Yet given that there is a distinct gap in our understanding of Trotsky's relationship to the Comintern following 1923, Broué's book could have been a source of new information.

Trotsky was still a member of the Comintern Executive Committee, and still played an active role in the Comintern at this time (for example, he wrote the Fifth Congress Manifesto on the Tenth Anniversary of 1914-17). How did he react to the international aspects of the faction fight, and the general problem of the bureaucratic control of the Comintern under Zinoviev? Some indication of the relative lack of attention which Broué devotes to the International is shown by the fact that the British general strike of 1926, in which the Communist Party made a series of classic opportunist errors and which was a key question in the internationalisation of Trotsky's struggle, is passed over in a couple of lines.

Some fascinating new material

Broué has indicated that the main question dealt with in his biography which is absent from Deutscher's book is that of the 1932 bloc within the degenerated Bolshevik Party, led by Smirnov, which led to a meeting in Berlin between Leon Sedov and Smirnov in 1931. The short chapter dealing with the various opposition blocs which culminated in the assassination of Stalin's rival, Kirov, in 1934 is one of the most interesting in the book, even though most of this material has been dealt with at length in the pages of the Cahiers.
Broué explains how between 1930 and 1932 Leon Sedov, Trotsky’s son, maintained a series of contacts with dissident elements inside the USSR, both those clearly in the orbit of Trotsky’s politics and members of the apparatus. One of the tendencies within the Party which came towards Trotskyism was the faction led by Sten and Lominadze, which did not fight openly against Stalin but burrowed away within the state and party machine. Smirnov had a similar position of using ‘capitulation’ to Stalin as a tactical manoeuvre, in no way changing his ideas or his surreptitious activity, which was carried out in partnership with a group of militants including the ex-Left Oppositionist, Preobrazhensky. This group, which Sedov described in a letter to Trotsky as being composed of ‘Trotskyist ex-capitulators’, became the centre for a series of discussions between the various oppositional groupings, including the Zinovievites and the Sten-Lominadze group.

This bloc of groups was also in contact with the ‘rightists’ around Ryutin and Splekov, whose slogan was ‘Down with Stalin’. Whilst prepared to accept the necessity of temporary agreements even with this tendency, Trotsky was against their slogan, firstly because Stalin could easily be replaced by his own faction with a Molotov or a Kaganovitch, secondly because this slogan could be given the content ‘Down with the Bolsheviks’ by the restorationists. He neither rules out co-operation with elements of the right in the struggle for the regeneration of the party nor with the Stalin faction itself against counter-revolution. Here as in all other issues Trotsky distinguishes between united action for limited but progressive goals and political chameleonism. He makes this clear in one of the few documents of this period which is available in English:

“To assume a protective colouring and politically dissolve into the general dissatisfaction with the Stalinist regime is something we cannot, we will not, and we must not do.”

In time, however, Stalin’s GPU discovered the existence of the Ryutin-Splekov group, also leading to the expulsion from the party of Zinoviev and Kamenev. In September 1932, the GPU discovered the existence of the Smirnov grouping and effectively broke it up, capturing the key contacts in Sedov’s network over the next few months. This information—entirely based on material discovered in the closed section of the Harvard archives—is indicative of the kind of discussion that Broué’s biography should have used more extensively. As it is, it is one of the few really striking events in the book which is illuminated by hitherto unavailable documents.

The correspondence between Trotsky and his son over this period largely deals with oppositional matters in the USSR, and was therefore confined to the closed section of the archives until forty years after Trotsky’s death, for security reasons. It was thus not available when Pathfinder made their last foray into Trotsky’s writings of this period, and the ‘uvres have yet to arrive at 1932. We will have to wait a good few more years before the whole story is known.

**Broué on Deutscher**

Comparisons with Deutscher’s classic biography of Trotsky are inevitable and are not always favourable to Broué. In general Broué’s work, coming three decades later and with full scale academic resources at his disposal, is far more scholarly and, it appears, accurate. Broué in his introduction writes sarcastically:

‘Deutscher was not a historian. He read too quickly, often being satisfied with merely glancing through a document. He often mixed up his files, forgot references or gave insufficient ones and filled in the gaps in his knowledge by using his imagination.’

One could add that Deutscher, writing in the years of the Cold War, was shamefully refused even the most minor academic post in the learned institutions of the British bourgeoisie. Professor Broué should perhaps make a little less of his academic credentials. The 61 pages of notes (although some are infuriatingly missing) and the voluminous quotations indicate a desire that his reputation as a professional historian should be maintained, and indeed good footnotes are an aid to further research. But, the tenacity and venom with which he stalks Deutscher through the pages of the book shows that we are in the presence of something of a vendetta. At one point Broué favourably quotes the anti-communist George Lichtheim’s verdict that Deutscher’s biography was a ‘discretely veiled apology for Stalin’.

Without expansion this remark can be understood as though Deutscher approved of the crimes of Stalin. In fact, of
course, Deutscher was not only a victim of Stalin and his successors but did criticise and condemn the actions of Stalin. A genuine criticism of Deutscher is that his analysis of Trotsky’s life is flawed by the fact that he views the revolutionary’s struggle against Stalin as inevitably doomed to defeat. Deutscher himself answered his critics on this score thus:

?Another criticism, which may still be repeated, is that by showing Stalin?s triumphs to have been inevitable I have after all justified his record. The criticism implies that reasonable men are or should always be reconciled to the inevitable. I do not accept this implication. Some of the proudest moments in man?s history are those when he struggles against the inevitable; and this his struggle, too, is inevitable.? 24

If, by quoting Lichtheim, Broué is rejecting this view then we can only agree. The fight of the Left Opposition was not only correct but was not doomed to defeat in advance.

Most of the criticisms Broué makes of Deutscher are on relatively minor issues. For example, Broué appears to be particularly proud of having set the record straight about the ?Zalutsky affair? of 1926.25 Deutscher claims that Zalutsky, a young Petrograd worker and supporter of the United Opposition, made a ?public speech? warning of the danger of Thermidor.26 Broué shows that in fact the row caused by Zalutsky was based on a letter written by someone else, denouncing what he had said in private.

As against the slapdash Deutscher, Broué is the very model of a modern historian, to the extent that he frequently over-burdens us with his knowledge. Like many French historians, after decades of high abstraction he has been bitten by the Anglo-Saxon bug of empiricism, and does it show! Do we need to know that the nephew of one of Trotsky?s friends from pre-war Vienna won a Nobel prize in 1965? Or that on 28 May 1934 Natalia Sedova and Raymond Molinier went looking for a flat for Trotsky in a newly acquired second-hand Ford? Or that on the boat from Spain to America in December 1916 Trotsky met a boxer?a nephew of Oscar Wilde no less?who had just fought against the heavyweight world champion, Joe Johnson, in Barcelona?

As well as crossing swords with Deutscher, Broué repeatedly takes on historians and writers in the USSR, attacking the more stupid old fashioned Stalinists, encouraging the more honest products of the Gorbachev era. This side of the book is inevitable and necessary given the period in which it is written but runs the risk of dating particularly rapidly, so quickly are events moving in the Soviet Union. Already Siejva, Trotsky?s younger son, has been ?rehabilitated? and Esteban Volkov, his only surviving grandson, has been able to visit the USSR. Public meetings about Trotsky, at which surviving relatives of old Trotskyists are present, have taken place and the victims of Stalin?s purges are being rehabilitated one by one. Here, Broué?s stress on the limits of this process is correct. Whatever the decisions about Trotsky and any eventual, purely legal ?rehabilitation?, the key question for the Soviet masses today is that his writings?and especially his writings from the 1920s and 1930s?should be freely circulated inside the USSR.

The fight for the Fourth International

Despite Broué?s criticisms of petty details, the major problem with Deutscher?s biography is not technical?it is political. Deutscher was attracted by the ideas of the Left Opposition and became a member of the Polish section of the Movement for the Fourth International after 1936. It was largely under his inspiration that the Polish section opposed the founding of the FI in 1938. Deutscher?s political opposition to what Trotsky felt was the most decisive work of his life?the struggle to build the FI?flawed the whole of the third volume, as the biographer engaged in a series of open polemics with his subject. These did indeed include downright distortion, as Broué rightly points out.

Given Broué?s ?Trotskyist? credentials, plus the extensive work he has been able to do in the Harvard archives throughout this decade, we have a right to expect a far richer treatment of this decisive period than we are given by Deutscher. However, it is precisely this part of Broué?s book which is the most disappointing. In fact we learn little that is not in Deutscher. We are given no details of the functioning of the International Left Opposition, the Movement for the Fourth International and the FI itself, even when Trotsky was working in close liaison with the leading bodies (1929-35, 1937-40). Yet the difficulties associated with their functioning were one of his major preoccupations.
Trotsky’s extremely close relationship with the French section is skipped over with surprising rapidity—the Action Programme for France (1934), whose principal author still remains a mystery, is barely mentioned—and some of the key political lessons of the 1934-36 period in France are not even dealt with despite all the headaches that the French Section gave Trotsky at this time. For example, Molinier and Frank’s La Commune project is presented merely as being an act of ill-discipline, not an opportunist error. But should one be surprised at this omission? Broué’s PCI comrades, whose right-opportunist MPPT makes La Commune look like Lenin’s Iskra, would hardly want Trotsky’s method demonstrated to them in what would be a damning fashion.

An overall discussion of how Trotsky saw the task of building the opposition in the period 1933-38 would have been extremely valuable. In France, for example, this five year period saw the rapid adoption of no less than five different turns in party building tactics (reform the PC, build a new party, enter the SFIO, leave the SFIO to build an independent party, enter the PSOP), each of which was supervised by Trotsky. How did he come to see the need for such rapid changes and manoeuvres? How were they received by members of the French section? Apart from the briefest discussion of opposition to the turn away from the PC in 1933, Broué does not deal with these questions.

During Trotsky’s final exile in Mexico (1937-40), which was also the period of his most intensive political work in building the FI, Broué decides to concentrate rather on Trotsky’s relationship with the Mexican artists Frida Kahlo (including details of their alleged affair) and Diego Rivera. In an attempt to outshine the over imaginative ?journalist? Deutscher, Broué shows his own style when he describes Rivera as having ?an elephantine body crowned with the smiling head of a thick-lipped toad?. Pages of descriptions of the Trotskys’ everyday life in Mexico push out far more important political issues.

Thus the many discussions which took place in Mexico with the leaders of the SWP and which helped define an important set of programmatic principles (the Labor Party tactic, the attitude to the American CP in the unions and on the electoral terrain, the black question in the USA, the nature and use of the Transitional Programme) are not described at all. Here it must be observed that some of them have also been excluded from the ?uvres too without explanation. Trotsky’s regular written interventions into the internal life of the SWP are similarly ignored, the articles in In Defence of Marxism on dialectical materialism are mentioned in just three lines and the question of the proletarian military policy, to which Broué himself has devoted a whole article in the Cahiers is barely mentioned.

Even the foundation of the FI is dealt with in a cursory manner. Broué spends most of his time settling accounts with two deceased political enemies (George Breitman and Pierre Frank) on the question of limited interest of when exactly Trotsky decided that it was the time to found the FI. Given that Frank actually admitted that he was wrong on this question at the beginning of the decade, it is hard to see what all the fuss is about. The proceedings of the Founding Congress (1938), and above all Trotsky’s work in preparing the founding documents, notably the Transitional Programme, are not dealt with at all. The problems associated with the functioning of the international leadership?of which Trotsky was a member?after the split by Schactman from the SWP are similarly absent. Repeatedly, Broué substitutes personal anecdotes for an exposition of key political and programmatic questions.

Perhaps Broué would reply that these are matters for more detailed, separate study. But it is difficult to justify these omissions when they are set against Broué’s choices for inclusion, such as his nine page debate with the historian Kneip-Paz’s characterisation of Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution as a work of ?dramatic art?. Given that Broué correctly attacks Deutscher for his partisan approach to the final phase of Trotsky’s life, to what Trotsky called the years of his ?most important work?, this ?orthodox? biographer’s silence on these key matters is strange indeed.

Broué and Trotsky

As has already been pointed out, one of the strongest points of the book is the massive amount of bibliographic data Broué has assembled. To this must be added his great attention to the lives and struggles of Trotsky’s co-workers. The pages teem with the names of long-dead militants, for most of whom Broué has been able to provide a brief biography and a picture of their activity and their personality. This tradition is particularly strong in France, where the late Jean Maitron’s massive multi-volume Biographical Dictionary of the French Labour Movement (covering two centuries and tens of thousands of names) is an invaluable source.
This interest in people which permeates the whole book is also shown in the way in which Broué puts Trotsky into the context of his time. Thus we learn that the surrealist Man Ray visited Trotsky in Prinkipo, and that the film actor Edward G Robinson?later to be witch-hunted under McCarthy?regularly went to Coyoacan. However, naturally the personality which dominates the book is that of Trotsky himself. This point touches on one of the clearest differences between Broué and Deutscher?s treatments of their subject?their personal attitude toward him.

Deutscher credited and repeated many of the criticisms of Trotsky?s political opponents who complained of his stiffness and authoritarianism, his lack of warmth and his political rigidity. Broué?s view is very different. Drawing on his personal friendship with Trotsky?s secretary Jean van Heijenoort (to whom the book is dedicated) together with a close reading of the writings of Natalia Sedova and Max Eastman, Broué weaves into the narrative a more human view of his subject, whom he reveals as someone capable of great warmth, humour and emotion.

For example, a side of Trotsky?s character very different from that usually presented is given in a letter from Trotsky to Smirnov, written in April 1928 whilst in exile in Alma Ata. In this letter?unavailable in English?Trotsky describes a recent hunting trip:

?This trip gave me a great deal of pleasure, centred on a return to barbarism: to sleep under the sky; to eat mutton cooked in a bucket, in the open air; not to wash; not to get undressed and thus not to get dressed; to fall from a horse into a river . . . to spend virtually 24 hours a day on a small pier, surrounded by water and reeds?all this can only rarely be experienced.? 28

This does not mean, however, that Broué is incapable of personal criticism. He is particularly harsh?and perhaps rightly so?in the section dealing with Trotsky?s relationship with his mentally-ill daughter Zina, who committed suicide in January 1933.29 Trotsky refused for a long while to recognise that his daughter was seriously mentally ill, and basically told her to ?pull herself together?, indicating a lack of personal sympathy and affection which shows, possibly, that Deutscher?s view was one-sided rather than completely false.

On one count however Deutscher?s biography does consistently score over Broué; namely, literary style. Broué?s book is clearly that of a professor. Deutscher?s book is that of ?an excellent writer, a journalist of great talent with a dazzling style, a forceful turn of phrase and an exceptional literary and dramatic quality?, as Broué puts it with misplaced irony.30 For sheer readability and excitement Deutscher beats Broué hands down, whatever his political errors. Nevertheless, this is after all a secondary consideration. Broué?s book is undoubtedly for the moment the definitive study of Trotsky?s life, although it certainly should not be the final word. Whatever its limitations (including the lack of a subject index!), it must be translated into English.

Endnotes
3 Socialist Workers Party (US), Towards a History of the Fourth International (In two bound volumes) (New York 1974)
5 L Trotsky, My Life: an attempt at an autobiography (Harmondsworth 1975); N Sedova, Life and Death of Trotsky; M Eastman, The Young Trotsky (London 1980)
6 Z B Zeman and W B Scharlau, The Merchant of Revolution (London 1965)
7 L Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed (five volumes) (London 1981)
8 Critique Communiste, 79-80, Nov-Dec 1988
9 Ibid, p34
11 L Trotsky, Terrorism and Communism (London 1975)
12 L Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, (Op cit), pp104-105
13 L Trotsky, Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1928-29 op cit, p223
15 L Trotsky, Challenge of the Left Opposition 1928-29, op cit, pp316-18
16 L Trotsky, The First Five Years of the Communist International (In two volumes) (London 1974)
18 Critique Communiste, 79-80, Nov-Dec 1988, p26
19 See P Broué, ?Trotsky et le bloc des oppositions de 1932?, Cahiers Leon Trotsky 5, 1980
20 L Trotsky, Writings: Supplement 1929-33, (New York 1979), pp168-72
21 P Broué, Trotsky p16
22 Ibid
23 See I Deutscher, Stalin (Harmondsworth 1966) p12
24 Ibid, p14
25 See the interview with Broué in Critique Communiste, op cit, p27, where he ?used his imagination? and gave the date as 1925
26 I Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, op cit, p244. Broué, despite being ?a historian?, manages to get the reference wrong . . .
27 P Broué, Trotsky p845
28 Ibid, p549
29 Ibid, pp692-99
30 Ibid, p16

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