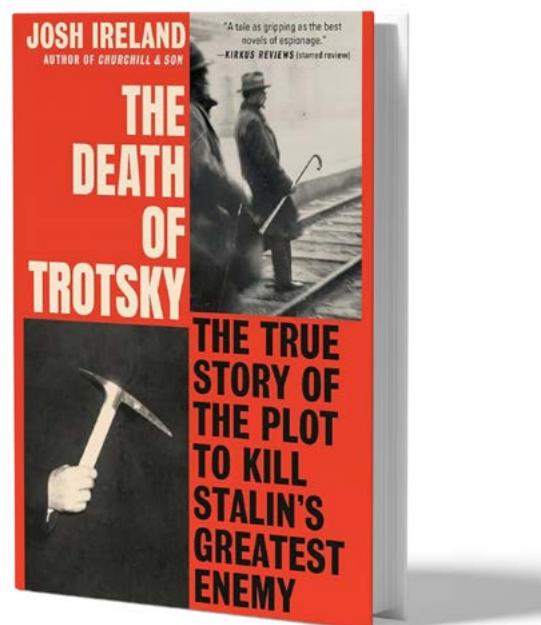


intelligence in public media

The Death of Trotsky *The True Story of the Plot to Kill Stalin's Greatest Enemy*

Reviewed John Ehrman

Author: Josh Ireland
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Reviewer: John Ehrman is a retired CIA officer and frequent contributor of reviews of intelligence literature.



Does the world really need another book on the assassination of Leon Trotsky? In truth, probably not. Memoirs, histories of Soviet intelligence, and biographies of Stalin, Trotsky, and some of the participants provide amply detailed accounts.^a With that in mind, however, British writer and journalist Josh Ireland's *The Death of Trotsky* provides a readable, straightforward telling of the story that makes for a good starting point for anyone who wants to become familiar with one of the most dramatic political showdowns of the twentieth century—one that ended with Trotsky's death in August 1940.

Strangely, however, this is a political story without politics. Ireland accurately portrays Stalin and Trotsky as ruthless Bolsheviks who developed a personal hatred that

was beyond measure. Nowhere, however, does Ireland delve into the ideological differences that drove the two rivals and that were so important to many of the events—the Spanish Civil War, the purges—that drove them and their followers. Instead, Ireland is content to show Stalin as a warped man, consumed by a lust for power as well as paranoia, and Trotsky as a brilliant theoretician and talented organizer whose blindness to his own vanity did much to cause his downfall. All accurate, but it leaves the book adrift in something of a contextual vacuum.

What Ireland does instead is focus on the human aspects of the story, telling it from three intertwined perspectives. It's a grim tale, like watching a fatal car wreck from which you can't turn away. The first strand

a. For overviews, see Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive* (Basic, 1999), Robert Service, *Trotsky* (Harvard University Press, 2009), and Mary Kay Wilmer, *The Eitingons* (Verso, 2012).

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The Death of Trotsky

centers on Stalin's obsessive effort to destroy Trotsky and all his supporters, real and imagined, through the purges at home and by deploying the NKVD to stalk them abroad. Stalin and his henchmen were relentless and by the time you read that in August 1939, the "headless body of Trotsky's former secretary and translator, the German Rudolf Klement, washed up on the banks of the Seine," you will have lost any sense of surprise regarding the lengths to which they were determined to go.^a (201)

The second is from Trotsky's perspective, as he was hounded from Moscow to Alma Ata and then Istanbul, Paris, Oslo and, eventually, Mexico City. Trotsky watched helplessly as his supporters in the Soviet Union deserted him or were wiped out. In exile, the walls steadily closed in. One by one, Trotsky's family was killed and he knew that he could not trust the people on whom he relied for protection, either because so many were NKVD agents or, that when it came to security and counterintelligence, his loyalists simply were hapless amateurs. It's difficult to feel sorry for him—after all, Trotsky was a key architect of the Bolshevik terror state—but Ireland still presents a story filled with pathos, a portrait of a man who was "impotent, hunted, a prisoner of his own past who had been defeated utterly by the man he had dismissed as an 'oafish provincial'" and left isolated and waiting for the inevitable. (287) Perhaps worse, one gets the feeling that by 1940, other than Stalin and a few diehard followers, almost no one in the world still paid attention to Trotsky or much cared what happened to him.

Tying these together is the third aspect of the story, the details of the NKVD's ultimately successful operation. Killing every Trotskyite except Trotsky was not enough for Stalin; when Stalin in 1938 replaced NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov with Lavrenti Beria, Beria understood clearly that his priority was to be the death of Trotsky. Beria put Pavel Sudoplatov in overall charge of anti-Trotskyite operations and, under him, Leonid Eitingon in charge of the actual assassination. (In the bizarre world of the Stalin-era NKVD, Sudoplatov had been sitting at his desk expecting to be arrested at any moment when Beria gave him his

orders and took him to brief Stalin.) Ireland gives a detailed description of their operations, which ultimately sprawled across Western Europe, the United States and, of course, Mexico.

Eitingon's great contribution was to develop Ramon Mercader, whom he already had spotted in Spain during the civil war, for the job of assassin.^b Ireland leaves Eitingon lurking in the background of the story, rightly focusing on Mercader. The portrait that emerges is of a confused killer. While a dedicated communist, Mercader was also something of an empty suit—a man easily manipulated by others (not least his mother) but who also had an uncanny ability to spot opportunities and take advantage of the gullibility of others. Mercader used these talents to worm his way into Trotsky's inner circle and gain the old man's confidence to the point where, fatally, Mercader was allowed to be alone with him.

Death of Trotsky is an easy read, and the action moves along. Ireland has done his research and the book is well documented, but given that this is an old story, he has added little new. Rather, it is Ireland's emphasis on the characters and NKVD tradecraft—while mostly in passing, *Death of Trotsky* gives an indication of the importance of illegals in that era—that combine to hold the reader's attention. The story also becomes more compelling as it goes along; the last third of the book, which focuses on Mercader's penetration of Trotsky's household and the run-up to the murder, reads like a thriller. Ireland's portrayal in this section of Trotsky's and his associates' astonishing negligence is a timeless lesson in the basics of security and counterintelligence.

For anyone interested in the human and operational aspects without the politics and ideology, *Death of Trotsky* is a good starting point. ■

a. Robert Service adds in *Trotsky* that "parts of his dismembered body were fished out of the Seine over several days." (432)

b. Wilmers, *The Eitingons*, is a fascinating look at Leonid and his remarkable family.