

Peter Robinson: Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson. Be sure to follow us on Twitter at [twitter.com/uncknowledge](https://twitter.com/uncknowledge). That's a new departure for us. Try it out. [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com/uncknowledge) forward slash uncknowledge. Christopher Hitchens is a journalist and author. His most recent book is entitled, God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. During at least part of his life, a subject to which we will return, Christopher referred to himself as a Trotskyist. Correct?

Christopher Hitchens: That's -- I guess, Trotskyist, yes.

Peter Robinson: All right.

Christopher Hitchens: Post-Trotskyist, yeah.

Peter Robinson: We'll give you time to elaborate.

Christopher Hitchens: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: Robert Service is a historian who has published major biographies of Lenin and Stalin, and his most recent book, Comrades, represents the definitive study of Communism as a worldwide movement. Robert Service's next book, to be published in November, 2009, Trotsky. Very simply and briefly, was Leon Trotsky a good guy or a bad guy? Bob?

Robert Service: I don't think he was a good thing. I mean, he had a lot of good things about him as a person, but he wasn't a good thing for anybody at any time.

Peter Robinson: Christopher?

Christopher Hitchens: He's one of the very few people with the Communist movement about him it would be worth asking that question.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment One: Trotsky and Revolution. Leon Trotsky, born in Russia in 1879. Second only to Lenin, Trotsky leads the Russian Revolution in October, 1917. On Lenin's death, Trotsky finds himself outmaneuvered by Stalin. In exile, Trotsky writes his autobiography and an attack on Stalin called The Revolution Betrayed. In Mexico City in 1940, Trotsky is assassinated by an agent of Stalin's secret police. Let's begin at the beginning. Trotsky is born to a farming family in Russia, in what is today in southern Ukraine. How do you go from a farm family to effectively second in command in the Revolution of 1917.

Robert Service: He comes from a farmer's family where there's a huge impetus towards education. His father is pretty uneducated, but like a lot of Jewish colonists down in that part of the world --

Peter Robinson: The Pale of Settlement in--

Robert Service: The Pale of Settlement, in what is now Ukraine. He wanted to get his children educated. And he sends them off to Christian schools. Actually, Trotsky didn't have a university-level education, but he had a very thorough Lutheran church education in science, in languages and all the rest of it. So, if you want to get on, join the professions, that's quite difficult for a Jew in the Russian Empire of those days. But you could also become a revolutionary. Now that way you could rise very quickly to the top.

Peter Robinson: So, are you, you're impl -- I think-- let me over to you. What I hear --

Christopher Hitchens: Good career move..

Peter Robinson: Well, yes. It's exactly that you're suggesting becoming a revolutionary as a career move. Christopher?

Christopher Hitchens: And you're leaving out -- or we're in danger of leaving out or leapfrogging to 1917 and omitting 1905, which I think is the -- his baptism, his crucible as a revolutionary where he became a tremendous speaker in whatever you want to call it, Petrograd, Petersburg, where the idea of the Soviet as the parliament was, an alternative Dumas, was first put forward. Where the revolutionaries conducted themselves as if they were speaking for a democratic majority rather than a factional minority and where they impressed [inaudible] by their demeanor at trial before they were sent off to Siberia. The great missed opportunity for Russia is 1905.

Peter Robinson: Yes.

Christopher Hitchens: If that doesn't work, then it's more, another decade of Czarism and then a terrifying war, which is the wreckage of the whole country.

Peter Robinson: Can you -- can I just -- you've just -- what is this 600 and some pages, I think, Bob.

Robert Service: Yeah, it's far too big.

Peter Robinson: Well, but it's -- the point, if I had your books here on Lenin and Stalin, this is about -- you were treating Leon Trotsky as a figure of major importance in the 20th Century. Why? Give me a sentence or two to help a layman understand why this figure matters to you.

Robert Service: He's one of the half dozen outstanding Marxist revolutionaries. He helps to make the October Revolution that brings the Communists to power in 1917. He's a leader of the Red Army that fights the civil war, and he's the intellectual architect of a lot of aspects of Communism that get laid down in the '20s and actually still have an impact through the '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s.

Peter Robinson: Which now leads me to ask you why you called yourself a Trotskyist. There's something in this man you admire, something in his writings to which you adhere?

Christopher Hitchens: Yes, the struggle of the left opposition against Stalin in the 1920s led to a sort of emulating movement, an anti-Stalinist, Marxist left in the rest of Europe and Asia, in fact everywhere, include America, Latin America, usually rather small, but often quite intellectually influential. And the thing about Trotsky, his record is something as Service was saying, is that he combined in himself the role of man of action and man of ideas. And he could write about literature, and did. He signed the -- helped to write the Surrealist Manifesto with Andre Breton and the people of that kidney. He'd hold forth on an amazing number of subjects, but he was a soldier as well and a revolutionary, and a person of immense moral and physical courage. So you had a charismatic figure, who in addition -- I'll just make one more point --

Peter Robinson: Yes?

Christopher Hitchens: --wrote pamphlets and made speeches against the menace of Hitlerism, which are much better and were made much earlier than any of Winston Churchill's. Irving Howe describes them as the greatest political polemic ever written in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Peter Robinson: I just thought of something. We've got just about one minute left in this segment, but I just -- I think I spotted something. You just spoke about Leon Trotsky in roughly the same way I've heard you describe George Orwell. Same tones of admiration for much of the same reasons.

Christopher Hitchens: George Orwell was --

Peter Robinson: True?

Christopher Hitchens: Well, no.

Peter Robinson: No?

Christopher Hitchens: But I can see what you must be noticing. In fact --

Peter Robinson: Man of action, man of the left standing --

Christopher Hitchens: George Orwell in fact -- George Orwell joined a sort of Trotskyish or Trotsky sympathizing, not actually officially Trotskyism, but a militia that had a lot of Trotskyist influence in it --

Peter Robinson: In Spain.

Christopher Hitchens: -- in Spain to fight against both Stalin and Hitler.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment Two. Defeat and Exile. On the death of Lenin in 1924, a succession struggle takes place among Stalin, Trotsky and others. Trotsky does not do too well. By 1927, he's removed from the Central Committee. In 1928 he's sent into internal exile and in 1929 he's expelled from the Soviet Union to which he never returns. What is taking place during those five years between the death of Lenin and the expulsion from the Soviet Union of Trotsky?

Robert Service: There's a factional struggle and the left opposition, as Christopher's been saying, posed the idea that the revolution was finished under its existing leadership of Stalin and others and that compromises had been made with the revolutionary spirit of the October events of 1917.

Peter Robinson: And this is Trotsky's position?

Robert Service: This is Trotsky --

Peter Robinson: He's a purist. He wants to return the --

Robert Service: Well, he says he is.

Peter Robinson: Ah.

Robert Service: He says he is, but actually most of his ideas overlap considerably with those of Stalin. The amount of dancing on the end of a pin, you know, a number of angels dancing on the end of pin on this question are very considerable. And I think that it's a mistake to take Trotsky at his own face value, to take his words at their face value. He believes --

Peter Robinson: Robert Service, I quote you from your forthcoming biography, Trotsky, "I became convinced that Trotsky's diagnosis of the causes of his defeat by Stalin was self-serving and misleading. Trotsky did not go down to defeat at the hands of the bureaucracy. He lost to a man with a superior understanding of Soviet public life." Explain that.

Robert Service: Stalin understood how the system worked. They were all bureaucrats. Trotsky said he was criticizing bureaucrats, that it was a bureaucratic system and he was on the outside of it criticizing the bureaucrats. But when you don't have a free press, an autonomous judiciary, when there is no pluralist politics at all, then everyone's carrying out orders in an administrative political system. So his critique in the 1920s of Stalinism as it was emerging was a false critique. It was based on lack of self-knowledge.

Peter Robinson: But was it a false critique or was it a critique that was true but to which he himself failed to live up? To end with a proposition [sic], good grief, that's a mess. But in other words, is there something in what he says, even if there's a bit of hypocrisy or more than a bit in his saying [inaudible]?

Christopher Hitchens: Well he's rehearsing for what he does later call Revolution Betrayed. And I think the great area where --

Peter Robinson: His book against Stalin.

Christopher Hitchens: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Which he writes in exile.

Christopher Hitchens: And he says the great point where he thinks the Revolution's being betrayed is in the Stalinist, essentially Stalinist concept and bureaucratic concept of Socialism in one country. Trotsky felt the Revolution had to keep going in order to survive and needed to ignite counterpart brother or sister revolutions in two countries in particular, Germany and China. And Stalin was not in favor of revolutions in nationalist policy in either place.

Robert Service: Now there I would totally disagree with you. I think the evidence is really strong that all the Communist leadership, the entire Communist leadership in the 1920s knew that the October Revolution in Russia would not survive unless it could expand. It couldn't survive in an isolated state. The only difference, serious difference, between Trotsky and Stalin was what were the chances of a successful German revolution? So that, for example, in the attempt --

Peter Robinson: Trotsky rated them as higher.

Robert Service: Trotsky rated them as higher --

Peter Robinson: Stalin and -- ah, Lord, do I hate to use this term of him, but he's a conservative figure in a certain sense --

Robert Service: He's a cautious figure.

Peter Robinson: He wants to consolidate the gains within Russia first. Fair?

Christopher Hitchens: [inaudible] yes. In conservative, you know, it's to the point of reactionary.

Robert Service: They all wanted to expand the Revolution. Internationalism wasn't just an ideological imperative, it was a practical one because if Russia stayed isolated, it would always be vulnerable to a crusade against it by Germany or Britain or France or the USA.

Peter Robinson: Richard Pipes, Christopher, in his history of the Russian Revolution, "In theory, one can conceive a Trotsky grasping the torch from the dying Lenin. What one cannot conceive is how he could have been in a position to do so. Lenin insured that the man who controlled the central party apparatus controlled the state, and that man was

Stalin." So it's not Stalin destroying the beautiful prospect by wresting control of the Revolution from Trotsky. It's the very founder of the Soviet State insuring that Stalin will succeed him.

Christopher Hitchens: Even though, at the last, Lenin realized he had made a mistake.

Robert Service: Ah.

Peter Robinson: But by then he had strokes, he [inaudible]--

Christopher Hitchens: Because Stalin was a very crude and ruthless machine man.

Peter Robinson: And by the way, do we know, is that established that Lenin effectively attempted to change his mind?

Robert Service: Yes.

Christopher Hitchens: Yes.

Peter Robinson: It is. It is established.

Christopher Hitchens: There's a reasonably -- what I think you'll agree is a good book -- Moshe, Professor Moshe Lewin's book. It's called Lenin's Last Struggle about the realization. But it doesn't negate what Pipe says about Stalin being made inevitable by that and to that extent. Isaac Deutscher makes a wonderful ironic comment about this. He said --

Peter Robinson: Isaac Deutscher writes the three-volume biography of Trotsky in the '60s, '50s?

Christopher Hitchens: '56.

Peter Robinson: All right.

Christopher Hitchens: They're called seriatim [in a series; one after another] the Prophet: The Prophet Armed, The Prophet Unarmed, The Prophet Outcast. The Bolsheviks made a huge study, all Marxists did in those days, of the French Revolution. They wanted to know what had gone wrong with it, how it eventually ended in Bonapartism, how could they prevent a Bonaparte from arising. They looked around their number, they were looking for someone flamboyant, ambitious, clever with military genius who -- obviously Trotsky's the one you have to fear Bonapartism from.

Peter Robinson: Because Stalin is the plodding figure.

Christopher Hitchens: While Stalin, boring, mediocre committee man who's always ready for another few hours of, you know, iron-bottomed attendance at the -- they didn't think he had it in him to be a Bonaparte.

Peter Robinson: Right.

Robert Service: Right.

Christopher Hitchens: It's one of the most sad and in a way almost beautiful ironies of history. It's so tragic.

Peter Robinson: Segment Three. What if -- let me read you a question that we got from a Twitter subscriber. Here it is. And this is the question of questions. It's from a man, Eric Ford Holivinsky [assumed spelling]. Anyway, some say the USSR would have been better had Trotsky led instead of Stalin. How so? So let us cast aside Segment Two in which we just demonstrated it would have been pretty hard for Trotsky in fact to have taken control and just experiment here in our minds. If Trotsky is in charge instead of Lenin, how are things different? Christopher?

Christopher Hitchens: Instead of Lenin or instead of Stalin?

Peter Robinson: Excuse me, I'm sorry. If Trotsky takes charge instead of Stalin. Sorry.

Christopher Hitchens: Well I think there would have been less anti-Semitism. And I'm not just being tautologous, I think because in general, less paranoia and less Russian-Georgian, if you like, chauvinism, backwardness and suspicion of the kind Stalin incarnated that leads to things like, not just purges but show trials where this sort of fantastic inquisitional sort, that are, you know, almost pornographic.

Peter Robinson: Let me quote --

Christopher Hitchens: I don't say there wouldn't have been some pretty warm work and Trotsky's enemies would have been ruthlessly dealt with.

Peter Robinson: Let me quote Bob in Trotsky. Trotsky -- I'm quoting you to yourself, Bob -- "If ever Trotsky had been the paramount leader instead of Stalin, the risks of a bloodbath in Europe would have been drastically increased."

Robert Service: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: How so?

Robert Service: Because he would have taken more risks in promoting the cause of revolution in Germany. They all agreed that there had to be a revolution in Germany, but Trotsky was prepared to take far more risks. The other thing that -- so there would have been a bloodbath in Europe before Hitler.

Christopher Hitchens: Or perhaps instead of.

Robert Service: Instead of Hitler, yeah.

Christopher Hitchens: Well, I'm not sure how much of a bloodbath that is. If it preempts National Socialism.

Robert Service: Well the other thing that would have happened had he succeeded Lenin in the mid-1920s -- the other thing that would have faced Trotsky, was how would he have brought about the industrialization of the economy, which he said he was going to do, and how would he have pushed peasants into collective farms, which he also said he was going to do, without force? It's very, very unlikely that he wouldn't have taken the decision that actually some force would have been necessary. In other words, a sort of gentle Stalinism would have arisen under Trotsky's leadership. These two were blood brothers who hated each other. You know, one a flamboyant multi-lingual, world historical personality. The other --

Peter Robinson: And an extremely good writer, by the way.

Robert Service: An extremely good writer, yeah.

Peter Robinson: An extremely good slinger of prose.

Robert Service: I mean his autobiography is magical to read. Stalin, solid, stolid, plotting, careful and also very steady. He didn't take off four months just to go and write a book on literature and revolution. But one way or another, the basic agenda of the two men was much more similar than it was dissimilar.

Christopher Hitchens: In fact, some of that isn't, doesn't even need to be speculative because there was a point where Trotsky said that labor should be -- when he was fresh from running the army -- the workers should be put in the army and put under orders. No, none of this sentimental dancing around about trade union rights and so forth. I mean it is a---we need to basically make labor into conscription.

Peter Robinson: Let me just simply put before you several of the outrages of Stalin and you tell me how they'd have been different, if at all, under Trotsky. The enforced famine in the Ukraine. Famine takes place, Stalin forces the kulaks [independent prosperous farmers], he sets up roadblocks so they can't escape from the famine and effectively starves them out. Trotsky? What would have been different?

Robert Service: I don't think this would have been the same.

Peter Robinson: It would not have been the same.

Robert Service: There is something really truly grotesque about what happened under Stalin, but something pretty grotesque would have happened under Trotsky. And it's only because we know how awful it was in the 1930s under Stalin that we tend to let Trotsky off the hook. That's my basic position.

Peter Robinson: Do you grant that?

Christopher Hitchens: Well, only because we know the circumstances. The material circumstances were very grim.

Peter Robinson: Yes.

Christopher Hitchens: I mean there was a great deal of scarcity and dislocation that anyone would have had to deal with. I mean, I think it would have had famine in the Ukraine if Generals Denikin and Kolchak and Wrangel had won the civil war and defeated Bolshevism altogether. So, I'm a materialist before I'm a Marxist on that. But Stalin is a --

Peter Robinson: You don't think so?

Robert Service: No I don't think so.

Christopher Hitchens: There's good evidence that Stalin used the famine to destroy Ukrainians.

Peter Robinson: To starve out his enemies, yes.

Christopher Hitchens: Clear Ukrainians, in other words.

Peter Robinson: Ah, right.

Christopher Hitchens: He was a racist.

Peter Robinson: Right, right.

Christopher Hitchens: He was arguably [inaudible] --

Robert Service: But famine wasn't inevitable in the former Russian Empire. It was something that often happened. It was much more likely to happen with a centralized state-run economy where a few people at the center, in Moscow, take all of the big decisions. And if you've got a bungler like Stalin, it's more likely to happen than if you've got a somewhat more astute character such as Trotsky. But it was still a risk that you wouldn't be able to run an economy. I feel it was an absolute certainty that you couldn't run that kind of economy and get the kind of results that you wanted for popular consumption such as you can have under a market economy.

Peter Robinson: Of the purges, Christopher, purges -- I'm speaking very loosely here by which simply to say, even within the -- Khrushchev drew the distinction that Lenin never killed a fellow Communist. Stalin hardly ever stopped. Right? So the notion was that anyone who might be in a position to pose some sort of threat to him, Stalin eliminated. Trotsky would not have done that?

Christopher Hitchens: Not in that way. No, I don't think so. Of course you are right, Stalin killed more Communists than Hitler did. Quite a lot more. And Stalin was paranoid. He had a sort of primitive mind open to conspiracy theory, didn't enjoy faction fighting. Trotsky loved it. He enjoyed polemics and he carried his own with people close to him all his life.

Robert Service: Yeah.

Christopher Hitchens: Sometimes he was a bit thuggish in prose, I've got to say. But you don't get the feeling that he secretly just wants to torture and kill anyone who gets in his way.

Peter Robinson: Ah, all right. Segment Four. I'm borrowing a phrase from your essay on the Ivan [sic Isaac] Deutscher biography, Trotsky's Moral Moments. Christopher Hitchens writes, in the second half of the 1930s, as a moral moment for Leon Trotsky, quote Christopher, "Trotsky was perhaps the most prescient writer of his day in warning of the true menace of National Socialism." Give us a sentence or two of explanation. National Socialism meaning of course the Nazis.

Christopher Hitchens: The rise to power in Germany of a mechanized and highly modernized but nonetheless sort of mediievally cruel and superstitious movement based on a very primitive race theory, the theory of racial superiority. And Trotsky writes a marvelous polemic saying it's incredible to see how millions of Germans now use electrical lights --

Peter Robinson: I'll quote it for you.

Christopher Hitchens: -- and drive on autobahns, but do you believe in the power of signs and magical symbols.

Peter Robinson: Trotsky, "Today there lives alongside the 20th Century the 10th or 13th. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcism. Capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism." That's pretty good, isn't it?

Robert Service: That is good, but then if you take the whole of Trotsky in those years, and not just that prescient --

Peter Robinson: Christopher does call it a moment, a moral moment.

Robert Service: A good commentary on Nazism. Yeah, he was right about Nazism, although he still thought of Hitler as a mere puppet of the, what he called the big bourgeoisie in Germany rather than an independent actor who could do even more damage than any kind of right-wing movement yet known.

Peter Robinson: Here's the bit that --

Christopher Hitchens: Yes, but I should just add that Stalin's line, the so-called third period of the Comintern [Communist Internationoinal] line, the German Communist Party's line was that Hitler was just that and no more. And that he could be allowed to win and it would be no worse because next would come Communism. It would just be a door opener for a Red Germany. And Trotsky writing to the general working class saying, if you give--if Fascism comes to power, it will ride over your skulls and your spines like a terrific tank. It'll be the end of civilization. You have to make common cause with the Social Democrats, making a united front against this monstrosity. He's look at --

Peter Robinson: He saw, he understood Nazism.

Christopher Hitchens: It's Cassandra, Peter. It's like hearing Cassandra and being ignored.

Robert Service: No.

Peter Robinson: But listen to this now. This business about 20th Century, next to which lives the 10th or the 13th, people use electricity, still believe in the power of signs and exorcism. Couldn't almost every word of that have been said about the Revolution in Russia to which Trotsky devoted his life's energies? That this thing was in fact a kind of - - at least certainly that is the point that Pipes makes in his history of the Russian Revolution. And Bob touches on it again and again, that Communism does not account for what took place in Stalin under -- and indeed through to Gorbachev. You have to understand the Russian substructure of it all. That there's a kind of barbarousness, which Marxism unleashes, right? So why--- here's what I'm trying to say. We grant that he had a moral moment looking at the Germans and the rise of Hitler, but does that -- it seems to me you're being a little too forgiving, that he didn't have a few moral moments about his own country.

Christopher Hitchens: Actually, what Pipes overestimates -- no, I suppose I mean underestimates, is the element of barbarism in Russia that has nothing to do with Communism but that is authentically Russian.

Peter Robinson: Yeah, but that's exactly the point that Pipes is making.

Robert Service: Yes, yes.

Christopher Hitchens: Serfdom, Czarism, anti-Semitism, pogroms, the black hundreds, the Czar being the head of the Orthodox Church --

Peter Robinson: That's precisely, that is Pipes' point [inaudible]--

Robert Service: But there's another aspect of this moral moment, that at the same time as Trotsky pointed out in the iniquities of Nazism, he thoroughly approved of the kind of revolutionary war that had been carried into Poland and hopefully, as he thought, into Germany in 1920. So when the moment comes for the Soviet Union to invade Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, eastern Poland --

Peter Robinson: He's all for it.

Robert Service: He's all for it. And he falls out with a lot of American Trotskyists over that very question. And when the Soviet Union invades Finland in the winter war of 1939 to '40, the same thing. He's all for it. So his idea of foreign policy is not a sort of morally pure position at all. If you take the German case, it looks a bit that way. If you take the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Finnish case, it doesn't look that way at all.

Peter Robinson: Trotsky's most -- I'm quoting you once again to yourself, "Trotsky's most enduring and tenacious battle was against the monstrous regime that had resulted from his earlier exertions."

Christopher Hitchens: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Stalin. On the other hand, as Bob has just told us, it's not as if Trotsky wrote off the Russian Revolution once Stalin had complete control of it.

Christopher Hitchens: That's right.

Peter Robinson: He was still a partisan.

Christopher Hitchens: There's a great argument among Trotskysant or Trotskyish academics, intellectuals, historians and so on, as to what would have happened if he hadn't been killed in 1940. In that, having always thought that the worker's state, however deformed or degenerated by Stalinism, was an advance over its rivals, even if extended by bayonets. After the Hitler-Stalin pact --

Peter Robinson: 1939.

Christopher Hitchens: The direct collusion.

Peter Robinson: Right.

Christopher Hitchens: There's evidence that in his papers and in his arguments and correspondence he was moving to a position of saying that actually Stalinism was a new form of barbarism and that the only responsibility one would have, historically, would be to take the side of its victims. These are the last things he's writing before Stalin has him killed.

Peter Robinson: Hmm. So --

Christopher Hitchens: So yes, the logic of this seems to be accepted by the person who we're talking about.

Peter Robinson: Segment Five. Trotsky Today. Robert Service. "When Trotsky was assassinated, the idea again went the rounds on the Western Political Left that the tragedy of Soviet History lay in Trotsky's failure to win the struggle to succeed Lenin." That somehow, that it was Stalin instead of Trotsky is the tragedy of Soviet history. Which is it?

Robert Service: Yes.

Peter Robinson: That retains some currency today, does it not?

Robert Service: It sure does. And I think it's totally wrong. It's a romantic view of Trotsky. Trotsky was in favor of a one-party state of mass terror, of an end to political and cultural pluralism. He was a thorough, schematic thinker and practitioner of all of that. The idea that somehow a humane version of Communism could have come out of Trotskyism is pure romanticism. But it appealed to people in the '60s and the '70s who wanted just such a figure, someone who's standing outside all of the worries about the Viet Nam War and all and wanted to think that there was a possibility that the USSR, if only it had been differently led back in the '20s, then a different turn could have taken place.

Peter Robinson: Now, which leads me to your [Hitchens'] thinking, because as I read your writings over a quarter of a century now, you have subscribed to --

Christopher Hitchens: Can't ask for more than that.

Robert Service: [Laughs].

Peter Robinson: You subscribe to this -- you were a -- you really did fall for Trotsky for - - you were part of the "If Only" school, were you not? Now you're not.

Christopher Hitchens: Well.

Peter Robinson: So what's happened?

Christopher Hitchens: Less and less, but never --

Peter Robinson: Explain yourself, not Trotsky, yourself.

Christopher Hitchens: Well, look. Here's the thing. It's a matter of how many "what ifs" and "if onlys" one's allowed. The American general who was set to invade Russia after

the First World War in Siberia. Remember how Ronald Reagan said the US and the USSR have never had a fight? Yes they had. The US was part of the foreign intervention after-- I've forgotten his name [quite possibly William S. Graves]. It was a Michigan detachment because they were good fighters in the snow. He said that in the areas of Russia controlled by the Whites, by Generals Kolchak and Denikin, he said he didn't know of anything in the annals of history that showed a regime that took human life at a lesser price than that.

Peter Robinson: [inaudible]

Christopher Hitchens: If Trotsky's Red Army had not won the Russian Civil War, then the word for fascism -- we have to face the fact -- was probably going to be the Russian word instead of an Italian word. We were not replacing a parliamentary democracy with an independent judiciary here. Okay? These things were not, so to speak, on the historical agenda. Now that doesn't mean that Communist teleological propaganda is thereby vindicated. But we have to -- we've got no right to say that we're all completely sure that it's a disaster that Trotsky wins and the Whites don't.

Peter Robinson: Hmm.

Robert Service: Yeah -- I -- that's --

Peter Robinson: Will you buy that?

Christopher Hitchens: I think perhaps --

Peter Robinson: That's fair. Is it?

Robert Service: It's a little exaggerated, but it's pretty fair that the Whites had officers who were vicious, carried out a brutal civil war against the Reds.

Christopher Hitchens: Brought the protocols of the elders of Stalin to Europe in their backpacks when they left. Not doing us any favors. Brings the German arm of Fascism with it.

Robert Service: But I mean, if the Whites had won the Civil War, that wouldn't have been the end of the matter. I think they'd have had a hard time consolidating a far right regime, just as the Communists had a hard time in the 1920s consolidating a far left regime. What I'm trying to say is that the discussion among the Communist leaders, the factional fighting, was over a fairly narrow terrain. And to disregard that and to put up Trotsky as a humanitarian Communist --

Peter Robinson: A lot of nonsense.

Robert Service: -- is basically worthless.

Christopher Hitchens: That really would be romantic. But don't forget my earlier point about 1905 either. In 1905 there aren't Bolsheviks nationally.

Robert Service: That was the chance.

Christopher Hitchens: Yes.

Robert Service: That was the chance.

Christopher Hitchens: And it's called -- what becomes the Bolshevik Party is called the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. And it's the Russian and International Left that really hopes for a democratic and relatively peaceful victory over Czarism. Which, if it had been consummated, would have prevented the First World War in all likelihood.

Peter Robinson: Do you buy that?

Christopher Hitchens: Without the First World War, it's hard to imagine either Nazism or Stalinism taking the form that they did.

Peter Robinson: Yes.

Robert Service: I think that if Russia had undergone a revolution in 1905, all sorts of forces would have been let loose, as they were in 1917 and --

Peter Robinson: Even if the liberals had managed to retain control? Even if, who was it Stolypin, the Prime Minister?

Robert Service: The big, big difference --

Peter Robinson: It was fancifully not fated to happen.

Robert Service: Well, it would have been difficult. But the big, big difference between 1905 and 1917 is the First World War. The brutalization and disruption of the First World War gave the Communists their chance. They wouldn't have had the same chance, I agree with this, 1905.

Peter Robinson: Christopher writes, Christopher notes, Trotsky admits, as the Second World War is underway and his own life is drawing to a close (he doesn't know the ice pick is headed at his skull, but he knows he's in failing health) that the war might end without a Socialist Revolution. Quoting Trotsky, "We would be compelled to acknowledge", Trotsky wrote, "that Stalinism was rooted not in the backwardness of the country, but in the congenital incapacity of the proletariat to become a ruling class." In other words, we were wrong from the get go.

Robert Service: Yeah.

Christopher Hitchens: Yes.

Peter Robinson: "Then it would be necessary to establish in retrospect that the present USSR was the precursor of a new and universal system of exploitation." Which is the view of the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev himself, in about 1989, '90 and '91, when the thing goes out of existence? Here's what I can't -- I'm asking for a kind of moral and historical assessment.

Christopher Hitchens: Well you may say -- you might say he took a lot of persuading before he [inaudible]

Peter Robinson: Yes! An awful lot of persuading. And even then, I'm not aware of -- is there a word of remorse that he utters?

Robert Service: I don't think so. I mean, he does actually entertain this thought only to dismiss it. In the end, he dismisses it, but at least he had had the thought that actually the October Revolution of 1917 was founded on a falsehood.

Peter Robinson: Tens of millions dead and it occurs to Trotsky that it may have been, oops! Just a mistake.

Robert Service: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: But he puts that out of---

Robert Service: And he's demoralized and ill and he's expecting to die. But the better thing for Trotsky would have been to have died several years earlier and to have stayed a martyr and not to have written the sort of stuff he wrote in the 1930s that condemn him in his own words as a weak version of Stalinist --

Peter Robinson: You reckon it would have been better for his reputation if he had never written *The Revolution Betrayed*?

Robert Service: Yes.

Peter Robinson: That's the attack on Stalin.

Robert Service: Oh, throw that in as well. I mean, it would have been good if had written that too. But if he died somewhat earlier, if we didn't have the correspondence that he held with the American Trotskyists who said, "How on earth can you support the USSR's invasion of eastern Poland? What on earth do you think you're doing, condoning what is essentially an alliance between the Third Reich and the USSR? What are you doing, saying it's okay to invade Finland, and why on earth do you assert that Marxism, Leninism is a scientifically proven set of doctrines? Why are you getting so uptight about new ideas of philosophy?"

Christopher Hitchens: I wouldn't be without that stuff you see and so --

Robert Service: You wouldn't be without?

Christopher Hitchens: I wish it had gone on a bit longer. I mean, it starts with a great discussion over Kronstadt, for which Trotsky was historically personally responsible.

Peter Robinson: The rebellion of the sailors.

Robert Service: The naval garrison.

Christopher Hitchens: The naval garrison of Petersburg.

Robert Service: '21, 1921.

Christopher Hitchens: Which was put down by brutal force and for which Trotsky accepted, as military commander, general responsibility. And it was brought up against him by a faction, actually I think one of them quite well associated with Hoover, James P. Cannon, in various polemics in the late 1930s, which are, I think, an imperishable read. They show a polemical mind and some very good rival polemical minds engaging at a very high level. I wish he'd lived another few years and had to accept the whole logic, which I think he would have done. I'd also love to see what he would have said about Zionism and Jewish Nationalism after the end of the Second W--

Peter Robinson: Did he think of himself as Jewish?

Christopher Hitchens: He thought of himself as a very --

Peter Robinson: He did.

Robert Service: He thought of himself post-ethnically. But in terms of background, he was absolutely open about the fact that he was Jewish. He never denied it.

Christopher Hitchens: And very sensitive to anti-Semitism as a weapon of reaction. But not, he thought of himself as a cosmopolitan.

Robert Service: Right.

Peter Robinson: We need to wrap it up, alas. Claire Luce used to say that history gives each man, no matter how large, only one sentence. Lincoln freed the slaves. What's the sentence that history gives to Leon Trotsky? Christopher?

Christopher Hitchens: Well, this is a sentence about him if I follow your Lincoln analogy?

Peter Robinson: Yes, yes.

Christopher Hitchens: Yeah, it's very good. I'll have to -- I'll brood about it.

Peter Robinson: Will you? All right, you take a pass.

Robert Service: I'd say it will be a double verdict. Such a waste of a talent. This was in the most amazingly brilliant man, a writer, a thinker, an active politician, but such a dreadful mistake of a life and a career and an ideological and revolutionary commitment.

Peter Robinson: I would give you...

Christopher Hitchens: George Steiner's book -- not book, George Steiner's essay on him is called Trotsky and the Tragic Imagination. And with me it is the element of tragedy, which you don't find if you're usually talking about the fall of someone who is power hungry.

Peter Robinson: Hmm. Christopher Hitchens. Robert Service, author of the forthcoming Trotsky. Thank you very much.

Christopher Hitchens: Thank you.

Robert Service: Thanks.

Peter Robinson: I'm Peter Robinson for Uncommon Knowledge. Thanks for joining us.