

Seventy-eight years since the assassination of Leon Trotsky

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Seventy-eight years ago, on August 21, 1940, Leon Trotsky died in Mexico City of wounds inflicted the previous day by Ramon Mercader del Rio, an agent of the Soviet Stalinist secret police, the GPU.

The assassination of Trotsky—the co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution, commander of the Red Army and founder of the Fourth International—was a monstrous political crime. It was the pinnacle of a wave of violent counterrevolution that included the coming to power of fascism in Germany in 1933, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39, and the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

Within the Soviet Union, a campaign of political genocide was carried out by the Stalinist regime against workers and intellectuals trained in the Marxist tradition, including nearly all the principal leaders of the Russian Revolution. Over 800,000 people were murdered in the Great Terror of 1936-39. As Trotsky wrote in the 1937 essay “Stalinism and Bolshevism”: “The present purge draws between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood.”

Trotsky led the political movement that opposed the bureaucratic and nationalist degeneration of the Soviet Union. Trotsky’s struggle against Stalin was not, as countless historians have falsely argued, motivated by subjective ambition for personal power. Rather, the struggle reflected two diametrically opposed political perspectives.

Stalin’s consolidation of power in the Soviet Union, facilitated by the death of Lenin in 1924, was a usurpation of power by a nationalist and conservative bureaucratic caste that emerged within the framework of an economically backward and internationally isolated workers’ state. The Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country,” first proposed in 1924, repudiated the internationalist perspective of the Russian Revolution and justified the subordination of the world revolution to the interests of the bureaucratic apparatus in the Soviet Union.

The Left Opposition, which Trotsky initiated in 1923, and the Fourth International, which he founded in 1938, were guided by the theory of permanent revolution, which was the

theoretical basis of the Russian Revolution itself. The overthrow of capitalism, Trotsky insisted, was not possible in one country. The contradiction between world economy and the nation-state system could be transcended only through world socialist revolution.

Living in exile in Mexico City, Trotsky understood that his life was under continuous threat. His refuge in the North American country followed his expulsion from the Russian Communist Party in November 1927, his exile to Alma Ata in January 1928, his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1929 and his flight from Turkey to France and Norway, and then to his final home in Mexico in 1937.

By 1940, Stalin had murdered many leading representatives of the Fourth International, including Trotsky’s political secretary Erwin Wolf in July 1937, the GPU defector and supporter of the Fourth International Ignace Reiss in September 1937, Trotsky’s son Leon Sedov in February 1938, and secretary of the Fourth International Rudolf Klement in July 1938, on the eve of the founding congress.

On May 24, 1940, an assassination squad headed by the arch-Stalinist painter David Siqueiros launched an attack on Trotsky’s home, using machine guns to spray bullets into the bedroom where Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, were sleeping. While both escaped with their lives, Trotsky knew it would not be the last attempt. Following the attack, he wrote, “I live on this earth not in accordance with the rule but as an exception to the rule. In a reactionary epoch such as ours, a revolutionist is compelled to swim against the stream.”

Then, on August 20, as the attention of the world was focused on the Second World War, Stalin’s assassin dealt the final blow that felled the greatest living Marxist and strategist of world revolution.

Despite the tragic and far-reaching consequences of Trotsky’s assassination, the crime was not seriously investigated until the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched the Security and the Fourth International investigation in 1975.

The Security and the Fourth International investigation

produced a series of revelations proving that the assassination of Trotsky and his supporters was orchestrated through a global network of spies and assassins who infiltrated the Trotskyist movement. These included Mark Zborowski, Robert Sheldon Harte, Floyd Cleveland Miller, Sylvia Callen and Joseph Hansen.

Callen was the personal secretary of Socialist Workers Party leader James P. Cannon, a position she used to provide crucial information to the GPU on Trotsky's activities (see: "An 'Exemplary Comrade': The Socialist Workers Party's 40-year-long cover-up of Stalinist spy Sylvia Callen"). Hansen was one of Trotsky's secretaries in Mexico City, a position that allowed him to make critical decisions that facilitated the plot against Trotsky's life.

The failure to investigate this crime had the impact of not only covering up for those who were involved in its commission, but also of undermining an understanding of the nature of the Stalinist counterrevolution. This cover-up was motivated above all by political interests. In 1953, the Fourth International was split by a pro-Stalinist faction led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. While still attempting to present themselves as Trotskyists, the Pabloites promoted the revisionist theory that the Stalinist bureaucracy could be pressured to carry out revolutionary policies.

This political orientation to Stalinism was accompanied by rabid hostility to any effort to expose its crimes. As the ICFI's investigation exposed the network of GPU agents who had penetrated the Fourth International and uncovered evidence of previously unknown relations maintained by Hansen with both the GPU and the FBI, the Pabloites responded with an international campaign of slander. They rejected out of hand the call by the ICFI for the formation of a parity commission—consisting of an equal number of representatives from the ICFI and the international Pabloite organization—to examine the evidence discovered by the International Committee.

On January 14, 1977, the Pabloite United Secretariat organized a public rally to denounce Security and the Fourth International and Gerry Healy, who was then the leader of the British section of the International Committee. For two hours, leading Pabloites and their allies—including Ernest Mandel, George Novack, Pierre Lambert and Tariq Ali—screamed insults and invectives from the speaker's podium. But not one of them referred to the evidence that had been published by the International Committee.

When Gerry Healy, the principal target of the tirades, rose from the audience to answer the denunciations and repeat the ICFI's call for a parity committee, Tariq Ali, the chairperson of the proceedings, ruled him out of order and refused to allow him to speak. It should be noted that Ali was to become a fervent admirer of Mikhail Gorbachev and

Boris Yeltsin, and he repudiated any association with Trotskyism decades ago.

The evidence uncovered by the Security and the Fourth International investigation has been completely substantiated. But to this day, the remnants of the Pabloite parties and their leaders have never acknowledged that the attack on the International Committee was slanderous.

For the ICFI, the Security and the Fourth International investigation was not only a question of exposing state agents. It was essential to clarifying fundamental political questions related to the counterrevolutionary character of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the capitalist state. It was inextricably connected to the fight against Pabloite revisionism and all efforts to cover over the crimes of Stalinism.

Its great achievement was to uncover previously unknown facts about the mechanisms and extent of the Stalinist conspiracy and to educate the Trotskyist cadre in the historical experiences of the movement, the character of Stalinism and the role of Pabloite revisionism.

To a new generation of workers and youth politicized in an era of mass state surveillance and police repression, protecting the independence of the workers movement in both physical and political terms is a matter of life or death. They will find in the Security and the Fourth International investigation crucial political lessons for the defense of the workers' and socialist movement against the agencies of the capitalist state.

The Security and the Fourth International investigation is a critical part of the revolutionary heritage of the International Committee. It was the only organization prepared to wage a struggle to expose the crimes of the GPU at a time when the Stalinist regimes still held state power and exercised immense political influence. It proved in practice that the ICFI adhered to the principles of Trotskyism and was uncompromising in its struggle against imperialism and all of its political agencies.

On this day, the seventy-eighth anniversary of Trotsky's death, the International Committee pays tribute to the memory of this extraordinary revolutionist as it carries forward the fight for the principles and program of world socialism to which Trotsky dedicated his life.

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