

Arsène Tchakarian (1916–2018): The Manouchian Group's resistance struggle

Part 1: The political origins and military record of the resistance fighters

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Arsène Tchakarian, the last remaining survivor of the Manouchian Group, died on August 4, 2018, at the age of 101. This group, named after its leader Missak Manouchian, included sympathizers of Leon Trotsky. It was the most famous organization of the Immigrant Work Force (MOI) section of the Sharpshooters and Partisans (FTP) resistance network, controlled by the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II.

Tchakarian barely escaped arrest in November 1943, during raids by the 2nd Special Brigade of the French General Intelligence (RG) agency, tasked with the killing of communists. After a show trial of 23 prisoners, the Gestapo shot them all in Mont-Valérien prison on February 21, 1944, except for Olga Bancic, who was beheaded on May 10, 1944, in Stuttgart. After the executions at the Mont-Valérien, French collaborationist and Nazi authorities widely spread the infamous anti-Semitic “Red Poster” that denounced the Manouchian Group as a “criminal army” of Jews and foreigners.

Three quarters of a century after Manouchian's execution, history has fully borne out Trotsky's criticisms of Stalinism. Aligned with the Soviet bureaucracy that would restore capitalism in 1991 in the Soviet Union, the European Stalinists blocked the overthrow of the fascist capitalist class after World War II. Now, under the aegis of the European Union (EU) and French President Emmanuel Macron, the French bourgeoisie is tearing up what remains of the social and democratic rights won by the workers during the liberation from Nazi occupation, and rehabilitating neo-fascism.

This gives renewed contemporary significance to the struggles of the Manouchian Group, and the courageous example it set in the face of Nazi-Vichy repression.

Tchakarian was born on December 21, 1916, at Sabandja

in the Ottoman Empire, which his parents fled amid the massacre of Armenians by the Turkish regime during World War I. Coming from a communist family, he participated as a member of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) in the 1936 French general strike.

There, he came to know Missak Manouchian, an Armenian poet and Citroën auto worker, who had joined the Communist Party after the attempted fascist putsch in France of February 6, 1934. He was surrounded by a group of communist workers. This group would ultimately include not only Armenian workers, but also Italian and Spanish workers, who had fought the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Franco, as well as many Jewish workers and youth from Poland, Hungary, and Romania. It would ultimately include over 100 men and women.

While under PCF authority, the Manouchian Group was critical of Stalinist policy. After the strangling of revolutionary situations, due to the counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinists in the Spanish civil war and the French general strike, its members opposed the Stalin-Hitler Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. This was a politically reactionary and ultimately unsuccessful attempt by Stalin to forestall a Nazi invasion of the USSR by abandoning all opposition to the Hitler regime.

Despite the torrent of Stalinist slanders and lies that were poured on Trotsky and other Old Bolshevik leaders of the October Revolution during the Moscow Trials and the Great Purges, all of whom would be murdered by Stalin, the Manouchian Group included a member closely linked to Trotsky.

Arben Dawitian, known politically as Tarov, and, in the Manouchian Group, as Manoukian, and who was shot together with Manouchian in the Mont-Valérien, had been a member of the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky inside the USSR in the 1920s. He had joined the Bolsheviks in 1917

and served in the ranks of the Red Army. In 1925, he was expelled from the Communist University of the Transcaucasus, due to his support for the Left Opposition.

Arrested in 1928 together with thousands of other Left Oppositionists, and deported and imprisoned for seven years, he underwent isolation and torture in the USSR. Having escaped to Iran in 1935, he wrote from there, in French, a “Personal Appeal to the World Proletariat,” published in English as “Tarov Reveals Torture of Real Bolsheviks in Stalin’s Prisons.” It revealed to the world the persecution of the Left Opposition, which the Stalinist regime was trying to hide from the world proletariat at the time.

After Trotsky called for a collection of funds for Tarov, the latter was able to travel to Paris and join the Russian group of Left Oppositionists there, led by Leon Sedov, Trotsky’s son.

Accompanied by a great deal of publicity, the Trotskyists published Tarov’s deposition to the Paris commission of inquiry into the Moscow Trials. However, Marc Zborowski, an agent of the Stalinist secret police, who had been infiltrated into Sedov’s circle, managed to block the publication of Tarov’s memoirs, titled *In the prisons of the Russian Thermidor*. After Sedov’s assassination by the Stalinists in 1938, Tarov/Manoukian abandoned contact with the Trotskyist movement.

In 1940, Tchakarian and Manouchian both fought in foreign units of the French army against the Nazi invasion, after the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact, defying PCF orders for neutrality in face of the Nazis. Demobilized after the French defeat, Tchakarian joined the Manouchian Group towards the end of 1940, clandestinely distributing anti-Nazi leaflets.

Faced with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the increasingly virulent and ultimately genocidal repression of the Jews by the French collaborationist regime, the Manouchian Group decided to take up arms. Its members did not take this decision lightly. They knew that among German troops in France, there were many workers who had been members of the German Communist Party. However, they decided that they preferred to take up arms rather than wait passively for deportation to the Nazi death camps.

The Manouchian Group was one of the most active in the Paris resistance and most feared by the Gestapo, organizing 15 attacks per month, on average, and undermining the Vichyite myth of Nazi invincibility. From July 1942 to November 1943, it organized over 200 operations (grenade attacks, shootings, assassinations, train derailments, and other acts of sabotage) against the occupying troops. These operations were carried out in broad daylight in occupied

Paris, which was controlled by the Gestapo and the French police.

When Manouchian took up a leading position in the FTP-MOI in May 1943, Tchakarian was named head of the first section of “triangle commandos,” a group that carried out approximately 115 operations between June and September. After a wave of arrests decimated other FTP groups, the Manouchian Group was one of the last to carry out active resistance in Paris in the summer of 1943.

One of its most spectacular actions was the assassination, on September 28, 1943, of SS General Julius Ritter—the head of the hated Obligatory Work Service (STO) requisitioning agency that deported French workers to Germany to work in factories for the German war effort.

Tchakarian escaped arrest in November 1943, thanks to support from sympathizers in the French police. In May 1944, he was taken out of the Paris area to Bordeaux. In June 1944, he joined the Lorris *maquis* (rural resistance militia) in the region of Orléans, where he participated in the taking of Montargis.

In line with the PCF’s anti-Trotskyist policy, the survivors of the Manouchian Group went on to participate, not in the Liberation of France and Europe from capitalist rule, but in the foundation of a post-war capitalist regime, which covered over the crimes of the ruling class. At the end of the war, Tchakarian received an officer’s commission and several medals. He later returned to his job as a tailor, while also serving as a researcher for the French Defense Ministry.

To be continued

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Further reading:

Tarov Reveals Torture of Real Bolsheviks in Stalin’s Prisons

[4 August 1935]

Increasing Oppression the Path of Bureaucracy: Leon Trotsky Analyses the Revelations of the Bolshevik Tarov

[6 September 1935]

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