

Trotsky's Last Year

Part Four

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This is the fourth part in a series. The first part was published on August 20. The second part was published on August 21. The third part was published on August 25. Part five will be published on September 3.

Trotsky's miraculous survival of the assassination attempt of May 24, 1940, proved to be only a reprieve. The GPU immediately set into motion an alternate plan for the murder of Trotsky. The next attempt would be carried out not by a heavily armed squad of killers, but by a lone assassin. Ramon Mercader, the Spanish agent chosen for the assignment by the GPU, had been introduced as early as 1938 into the milieu of the Fourth International by his girlfriend Sylvia Ageloff. Her specific relationship to the Socialist Workers Party remains unclear, though she seems to have functioned as a courier for the Fourth International and SWP.

It is hard to reconcile Ageloff's high-level connections to the Fourth International with her personal and political naïveté. In the course of an intimate relationship that spanned nearly two years, she either did not notice or suppressed concerns over the glaring anomalies, contradictions and mysteries that swirled around her very strange companion: his multiple identities (Frank Jacson, Jacques Mornard, Vandendresched), highly dubious business activities and unlimited supply of ready cash. It never occurred to Ageloff—or so she claimed in the aftermath of the assassination to suspicious and unbelieving Mexican prosecutors—that there was something very wrong about her boyfriend, and that he was definitely not the sort of person who should be allowed anywhere near Trotsky.

In the spring of 1940, Jacson-Mornard utilized the opportunity provided by Ageloff to make himself a familiar presence to Trotsky's guards, even though he evinced no interest in meeting the revolutionary leader. Frequently driving Ageloff to the villa on the Avenida Viena, Jacson-Mornard appeared content to wait outside until she had completed her work. But he chatted with the guards and carefully cultivated a relationship with Trotsky's close friends, Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer. Despite decades in the revolutionary movement, they found nothing peculiar about Jacson-Mornard, the supposedly apolitical businessman with plenty of money and a great deal of free time. The French-born couple failed to detect an accent in the Spanish-born agent who claimed to be Belgian.

It was not until four days after the May 24 assault that Jacson-Mornard entered the compound for the first time and briefly met Trotsky. On one of his trips to Coyoacán, Jacson-Mornard approached the guards, who were strengthening the external walls of the villa. They told him that they were preparing for another assault by the GPU. Jacson-Mornard remarked, with studied casualness, that the GPU's next attempt on Trotsky's life would use a different method.

Trotsky's work continued at his customarily grueling pace. Though intensely occupied with the exposure of the May 24 conspiracy and the refutation of the brazen claims by the Mexican Communist Party and the Stalinist-controlled trade unions and press that the attack was a "self-assault" planned by Trotsky and executed by his supporters, he

carefully followed the unfolding of World War II. By mid-June, France had surrendered and Hitler's armies ruled over Western Europe. A tragedy of unprecedented dimensions had befallen the working class. In a brief note written on June 17, 1940, two days after France's defeat, Trotsky wrote:

The capitulation of France is not a simple military episode. It is part of the catastrophe of Europe. Mankind can no longer live under the regime of imperialism. Hitler is not an accident; he is only the most consistent and the most bestial expression of imperialism, which threatens to crush our whole civilization. [1]

The monstrous crimes of Hitler arose out of capitalism and the noxious global politics of imperialism. But Hitler's conquest of Western Europe was made possible by the assistance he received from Stalin. The dictator's betrayals of the working class—first through his "popular front" alliances with the democratic imperialists, then followed suddenly by his agreement with Hitler—disoriented the working class and strengthened Nazi Germany's military position. "By demoralizing the popular masses in Europe, and not solely in Europe, Stalin played the role of an agent provocateur in the service of Hitler. The capitulation of France is one of the results of such politics," Trotsky wrote. Stalin has taken the USSR "to the very brink of the abyss." Trotsky warned that Hitler's "victories in the West are only preparation for a gigantic move toward the East." [2] Almost exactly one year later, on June 22, 1941, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union.

The political and security issues arising from the May 24 raid and the epochal events in Europe necessitated a visit to Mexico by a delegation of SWP leaders, headed by party founder and leader James P. Cannon. Between Wednesday, June 12, and Saturday, June 15, Trotsky participated in a comprehensive discussion of the SWP's political work under conditions of war. Participants in this discussion included, in addition to Trotsky and Cannon, Charles Cornell, Farrell Dobbs, Sam Gordon, Antoinette Konikow, Harold Robins and Joseph Hansen. Long suppressed documents obtained in the 1970s and 1980s by the International Committee of the Fourth International were to establish that Hansen was a GPU plant inside Trotsky's secretariat.

An unedited stenographic report of this discussion was circulated to the SWP membership. The discussion on the first item on the agenda, which was a report on the Fourth International's Emergency Conference, was not transcribed. The verbatim record of the discussions begins with the second item on the agenda, "War and Perspectives." Trotsky's contributions to this discussion emphasized that the party's principled opposition to the imperialist war should not be confused or in any way associated with petty-bourgeois pacifism.

The entry of the United States into the war was inevitable. Trotsky

insisted that the SWP had to translate principled opposition to the war into effective revolutionary agitation that intersected with the consciousness of the workers, without adapting to national chauvinism.

Militarization now goes on on a tremendous scale. We cannot oppose it with pacifist phrases. The militarization has wide support among the workers. They bear a sentimental hatred against Hitler with confused class sentiments. They have a hatred against the victorious brigands. The bureaucracy utilizes this to say help the defeated gangster. Our conclusions are completely different. But this sentiment is the inevitable base for the last period of preparation. [3]

The challenge confronting the SWP was to develop an approach to the young workers which, even as they were being drawn into the military, developed their class consciousness. The party had to place its agitation “on a class basis.” [4] Trotsky provided examples of the approach the party should take:

We are against the bourgeois officers who treat you like cattle, who use you for cannon-fodder. We are concerned about the deaths of the workers, unlike the bourgeois officers. We want workers’ officers.

We can say to the workers: We are ready for revolution. But you aren’t ready. But both of us want our own workers’ officers in this situation. We want special workers’ schools which will train us to be officers...

We reject the control of the Sixty Families. We want an improvement of conditions for the worker-soldier. We want to safeguard his life. Not waste it. [5]

The discussion turned on Thursday, June 13, to the SWP’s policy for the 1940 presidential election. The Democratic incumbent, Franklin Roosevelt, was running for a third term. The party had not nominated a candidate of its own. “What do we tell the workers when they ask which president they should vote for?” Cannon replied, “They shouldn’t ask such embarrassing questions.” [6]

Trotsky asked why the SWP had not called for a congress of trade unions to nominate a candidate in opposition to Roosevelt. “We cannot remain completely indifferent,” he argued. “We can very well insist in unions where we have influence that Roosevelt is not our candidate and the workers must have their own candidate. We should demand a nationwide congress connected with the [demand for an] independent labor party.” [7]

Trotsky raised the question of the presidential candidacy of the American Communist Party. Since the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact, the Communist Party had adopted a position of opposition to the entry of the United States into the war. No doubt, this maneuver by the Stalinist leadership was determined entirely by the foreign policy of the Kremlin. But it was taken seriously by sections of the Communist Party membership. Did this not provide an opportunity for the SWP to intervene among the Stalinist workers? Trotsky proposed that the SWP, having no candidate of its own, consider giving critical support to the presidential campaign of Communist Party leader Earl Browder. However disoriented by the Stalinist leadership, the membership of the party included a significant layer of class-conscious workers. A timely political maneuver by the SWP—extending critical support to the Communist Party campaign on the basis of its present opposition to American entry into the war—would open up the possibility of approaching the Stalinist workers.

Trotsky’s proposal was vehemently opposed by Cannon and virtually

all the other participants in the discussion. In the course of years of bitter struggle against the Stalinists, the SWP’s influence within the trade unions had required the development of alliances with “progressive” sections of the trade union bureaucracy. The maneuver proposed by Trotsky would undermine these relations.

Trotsky was critical of the SWP’s approach to the “progressive bureaucrats,” who were aligned politically with Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. “These progressive bureaucrats,” Trotsky noted, “can lean on us for advisors in the fight against the Stalinists. But the role of an advisor to the progressive bureaucrat doesn’t promise much in the long run.” [8]

Countering Trotsky, Antoinette Konikow—who had been one of the first American supporters of the Left Opposition back in the 1920s—stated that unlike the Stalinists, American AFL leaders like Dan Tobin (leader of the Teamsters) and John L. Lewis (leader of the United Mine Workers) would not try to kill Trotskyists.

“I am not so sure,” Trotsky replied. “Lewis would kill us very efficiently if he were elected and war came.” [9]

Trotsky did not insist that the SWP adopt the policy he proposed. But as the discussion continued on Friday, June 14, he made a trenchant criticism of the party’s orientation to the progressives.

I believe we have the critical point very clear. We are in a bloc with so-called progressives—not only fakers but honest rank and file. Yes, they are honest and progressive but from time to time they vote for Roosevelt—once in four years. This is decisive. You propose a trade union policy, not a Bolshevik policy. Bolshevik policies begin outside the trade unions. The worker is an honest trade unionist but far from Bolshevik politics. The honest militant can develop but it is not identical with being a Bolshevik. You are afraid to become compromised in the eyes of the Rooseveltian trade unionists. They on the other hand are not worried in the slightest about being compromised by voting for Roosevelt against you. We are afraid of being compromised. If you are afraid, you lose your independence and become half-Rooseveltian. In peacetimes this is not catastrophic. In wartimes it will compromise us. They can smash us. Our policy is too much for pro-Rooseveltian trade unionists. I notice that in the *Northwest Organizer* [the newspaper of Teamsters Local 544 in Minneapolis, edited and controlled by the SWP] this is true. We discussed it before, but not a word was changed; not a single word. The danger—a terrible danger—is adaptation to the pro-Rooseveltian trade unionists. You don’t give any answer to the elections, not even the beginning of an answer. But we must have a policy. [10]

Trotsky continued his criticism of the SWP’s adaptation to the trade union progressives on Saturday, June 15, the final day of the discussion.

It seems to me that a kind of passive adaptation to our trade union work can be recognized. There is not an immediate danger, but a serious warning indicating a change in direction is necessary. Many comrades are more interested in trade union work than in party work. More party cohesion is needed, more sharp maneuvering, a more serious systematic theoretical training; otherwise the trade unions can absorb our comrades. [11]

As the discussion on the SWP’s policy in the 1940 election drew to a conclusion, one final issue arose: could the Communist Party be considered a legitimate part of the workers’ movement? Trotsky replied

emphatically:

Of course the Stalinists are a legitimate part of the workers' movement. That it is abused by its leaders for specific GPU ends is one thing, for Kremlin ends another. It is not at all different from other opposition labor bureaucracies. The powerful interests of Moscow influence the Third International, but it is not different in principle. Of course we consider the terror of the GPU control differently; we fight with all means, even bourgeois police. But the political current of Stalinism is a current in the workers movement. [12]

Despite the crimes committed by the Stalinists—and only three weeks had passed since the attempt on his life—Trotsky insisted upon an objective appraisal of Stalinism. “We must consider them from the objective Marxist viewpoint,” Trotsky insisted. “They are a very contradictory phenomenon. They began with October as the base, they have become deformed, but they have great courage.” [13] The purpose of the maneuver proposed by Trotsky was to exploit this contradiction in the loyalties of the Stalinist rank and file:

I think that we can hope to win these workers who began as a crystallization of October. We see them negatively; how to break through this obstacle. We must set the base against the top. The Moscow gang we consider gangsters but the rank and file don't feel themselves to be gangsters, but revolutionists... If we show that we understand, that we have a common language, we can turn them against their leaders. If we win five percent, the party will be doomed. [14]

Trotsky and the SWP delegation did not come to an agreement on the proposal for the extension of critical support to the Communist Party candidate, which he did not insist on. The difference did not undermine Trotsky's relationship with the Socialist Workers Party, and the discussions ended amicably. In any event, to the extent that the SWP had evinced a detectable level of adaptation to the progressive bureaucrats, Trotsky's criticism had a salutary impact on the party. Within weeks, Trotsky noticed and commented favorably on the political strengthening of the *Northwest Organizer*.

One of the participants in the discussion later recalled a remarkable incident that cast light on Trotsky's pedagogical approach to political discussions. Harold Robins, a New York-born worker who had traveled to Mexico in 1939 and become the captain of Trotsky's guard, took part in the morning discussion on June 13, during which Trotsky raised the question of critical support for the CP's presidential candidate. In an obituary that I wrote following Robins' death in 1987 at the age of 79, I included an account of his personal experience that he had relayed to me.

When his turn to speak came, Harold launched into a vitriolic denunciation of the Stalinists, enumerating their many betrayals of the working class, and their slavish collaboration with the bourgeois politicians. Harold proclaimed that there wasn't “any god-damn difference between the Stalinists and the Democrats.”

Trotsky raised his hand and broke into Harold's speech. “Permit me a question, Comrade Robins. If there exist no differences between the Stalinists and the Democrats, why do they retain an independent existence and call themselves Communists? Why do

they not simply join the Democratic Party?”

Harold was taken aback by these simple questions. This elementary lesson in dialectics immediately made it clear to Harold that his own position was wrong. But the story did not end there.

With the issue still undecided, the meeting broke for lunch. Trotsky approached Harold and asked him what his position was.

“Well, I now think you're right, Comrade Trotsky.”

The “Old Man” beamed with satisfaction. “Then, Comrade Robins, I propose we form a bloc and conduct the struggle together when the meeting resumes.”

Harold remembered thinking that he could not believe the “Old Man” was serious.

“Why the hell would Trotsky want or need a bloc with Harold Robins?”

At any rate, he accepted Trotsky's offer and looked forward to the start of the afternoon session. However, as the lunch break was coming to a close, Robins was approached by another guard, Charles Cornell, who was bitterly disappointed that he was to remain on duty during the afternoon and would not be able to participate in the discussion with Trotsky. Cornell pleaded with Robins to change places with him, and Robins relented. And so Cornell went into the discussion while Robins patrolled the premises.

Late in the afternoon, soon after the meeting ended, Harold found himself suddenly confronted by an obviously angry Trotsky. “Where were you, Comrade Robins?,” Trotsky demanded.

Harold sought to explain the circumstances which had intervened during the lunch break. Trotsky brushed his arguments aside. “We had a bloc, Comrade Robins, and you betrayed it.”

Harold recounted such incidents without the slightest sense of embarrassment, even though they hardly placed him in the best light. But for Harold, these events were precious examples of Trotsky's utter completeness as a revolutionary, inflexibly devoted to principles in all aspects of his life and under all conditions.

Here was a man, Harold seemed to be saying, who had led the greatest revolution in history, organized an army of millions, and participated in epochal political struggles alongside of the legendary figures of the international Marxist movement. And yet the same man, Trotsky, could propose a bloc with an unknown rank-and-file “Jimmy Higgins” and view it as seriously as he once viewed an alliance with Lenin! Harold was more than happy to “diminish himself” and recount his own youthful mistakes in order to convey the moral grandeur of Trotsky. [15]

In the course of their trip to Coyoacán, the SWP leaders inspected the villa and approved construction work that would fortify the compound against attack. Despite their sincere commitment to Trotsky's defense, their efforts were undermined by a disturbing level of personal carelessness. Even though there remained unanswered questions about the role of Sheldon Harte in the May 24 assault, there is no indication that SWP leaders were taking a more cautious attitude toward their personal associations. Given the continuing campaign against Trotsky in the Stalinist press, it should have been clear to the SWP leaders that the political environment in Mexico City was dangerous, and that the capital was crawling with GPU agents intent on eliminating Trotsky.

Nevertheless, on the evening of June 11, James P. Cannon and Farrell Dobbs accepted an invitation to dinner at the Hotel Geneva, followed by drinks at another locale. The host of the two SWP leaders was Jason-Mornard. [16] This encounter was reported by Cannon in the course of a brief internal investigation conducted by the SWP leadership following the assassination. This information was, however, concealed from the rank and file party membership.

To be continued

[1] “The Kremlin’s Role in the European Catastrophe,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–40* (New York: 1973), p. 290

[2] *Ibid*, pp. 290–91

[3] “Discussions with Trotsky,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–40*, p. 253

[4] *Ibid*, p. 254

[5] *Ibid*

[6] *Ibid*, p. 260

[7] *Ibid*, pp. 260–61

[8] *Ibid*, p. 266

[9] *Ibid*, p. 267

[10] *Ibid*, pp. 271–73

[11] *Ibid*, pp. 280–81

[12] *Ibid*, p. 282

[13] *Ibid*

[14] *Ibid*

[15] *A Tribute to Harold Robins, Captain of Trotsky’s Guard*, by David North (Detroit: 1987), pp. 8–10

[16] *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, by Patenaude, Bertrand M. (p. 270). Harper Collins e-books. Kindle Edition.

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