



The Assassination of Leon Trotsky

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August 20 and 21 mark the seventieth anniversary of the assassination and death of Leon Trotsky, next to Lenin the greatest revolutionary of the twentieth century. Simon Hardy, in a chapter from a forthcoming book, records how Stalin and his gangsters brought this about. (Click [here](#) [1] to see Simon on Russia Today talking about the legacy of Trotsky today).

In August 1940, Trotsky was living in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacan, a fugitive from the Russian secret police, the most feared and effective international agency of murder and repression. He had already been convicted of incredible crimes against the Soviet Union, in the frame-up Moscow Trials of 1936-38, and knew full well that it was only a matter of time before Stalin attempted to end the life of his most determined revolutionary opponent.

Mexico's radical populist president, Lázaro Cárdenas, had offered Trotsky asylum in January 1937 when no other country was willing to do so. Cárdenas was also sympathetic to the cause of the Spanish Republic in the Civil War (1936-39) and, after Franco's victory, Mexico flung open its doors to Republican and Leftist refugees. Unfortunately, amongst them were those who would plot to kill Trotsky. In the closing years of the Spanish Civil War, the NKVD (as the GPU had recently been re-named) had built up a huge apparatus of repression in that country, including its own prisons and torture chambers. It was in these that Andreu (Andrés) Nin, the leader of the Party of Marxist Unification, the POUM, perished. Until the foundation of the POUM in 1935, which led to a political break with Trotsky, Nin had been the principal leader of the Spanish Left Oppositionists. Although no longer Trotskyists, Nin and the POUM courageously denounced the Moscow Trials and fought alongside the Barcelona workers in their resistance to the Stalinist takeover of the city from the workers' committees in May 1937. This led to the Stalinists denouncing Nin and the POUM as Trotskyists and arresting and murdering their leaders. At this time, too, Erwin Wolf (1902-1937) one of Trotsky's secretaries in Norway and then a member of the International Secretariat, 'disappeared' into the GPU's prisons, never to be seen again.

In 1939, many GPU agents, both Spanish and Russian, came to Mexico but some came not as refugees but as hit squads with the mission to kill Trotsky. In fact, there were two active GPU units in Mexico City, both of which were to be activated to carry out the assassination. One network was called 'Horse', the codename for the famous mural painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, a leading Communist Party member, rabid anti Trotskyist and totally loyal Stalinist. He had the connections and could recruit others to help out in an attack. Horse was handled by two key GPU agents, Iosif Gringulevich and Carlos Contreras (Vittorio Vidali). They were both members of the GPU 'special unit' which had conducted the interrogation, torture and assassination of Andreu Nin.

On May Day, 1940, the Stalinists organised a 20,000 strong march through Mexico City calling for the expulsion of Trotsky, some of the crowd also chanted 'death to Trotsky.' The Stalinist policy was to apply maximum pressure on the Mexican government to expel him. Their press regularly attacked Trotsky, implicating him either in trying to destabilise the government or, alternatively, accusing him of trying to influence the government in breach of his visa agreements.

At 4.00 on the morning of 25 May, the Stalinists struck. Dressed in policemen's uniforms they surprised the police guards outside, bound and gagged them and knocked on the door. The attackers entered the grounds of the house after one of the guards, Robert Sheldon Harte, opened the door. As they went into the courtyard, they opened fire on the

house with Thompson sub-machine guns, pouring over 300 rounds through the windows and into the walls. Trotsky and Natalia threw themselves under the bed to take cover. Their 14-year old grandson Seva Volkov did the same and was slightly injured by flying glass and a graze from a bullet on the foot. One of the attackers may even have got into the bedroom to fire shots through the mattress.

As the attackers made for the gate to flee, one of them threw a grenade into the house, causing a fire. Three bombs were also thrown, but they failed to explode properly. Eventually, two of the guards, Otto Schuessler and Charles Curtiss, were able to enter the house and get to Trotsky and his family. Miraculously, no one was seriously hurt but, as the smoke cleared, they discovered that Harte was gone.

Suspicious were raised about the attack shortly after the police's arrival. A day later, they arrested some of Trotsky's guards, accusing them of organising a 'self-assault' to try to frame the Stalinists. This was vigorously denied. As Trotsky pointed out, the price that would have been paid if such a conspiracy had been uncovered would have been too damaging, it would have not only jeopardised his stay in Mexico but completely destroyed the prestige of the Fourth International itself.

Soon, the police turned their attention to trying to find Harte. With regard to this, a number of important details have subsequently come to light. Several sources have pointed to evidence that Harte was indeed a GPU agent, albeit a recent and very green recruit.¹ Firstly, Harte's father, in an interview with the Mexican police, stated that a picture of Stalin was on the wall in his son's room. Other evidence pointed to Harte having access to a considerable amount of money when he arrived in Mexico, certainly much more than his modest salary as a guard would have given him. It was believed that Harte had been told by his handlers to let the attackers into the house and had then been driven away in one of the cars.

More damaging are the claims made by some of the attackers themselves, which also indicate that Harte at least knew the assailants. An enquiry by the Mexican police led to the arrest of several people, all of whom were connected with the Mexican CP in some way. Under interrogation, one of the men involved in the attack admitted that Harte had been involved, he had been the inside man who was supposed to open the door. Nestor Sanchez Hernandez, a Communist Party member and veteran of the International Brigades, admitted to police that he had seen Harte speaking with one of the principal organisers in 'a nervous and friendly manner.' Another account identifies this organiser as Iosif Gringulevich and describes a heated argument erupting between him and Harte in the escape car, the latter becoming increasingly agitated and upset. Harte is reported as claiming he had been told that the intention of the raid was only to destroy the archives. Harte felt betrayed as he realised that the intention of the attack had in fact been to murder the Old Man. The GPU agents decided that Harte could not be trusted to keep his mouth shut. His body was discovered a month later. He had been shot and buried in quicklime in the grounds of a villa in the countryside.

Trotsky wrote an obituary to Harte, denying the accusations that were already circulating that he was a Stalinist agent. The exact truth may never be known, but what is clear is that the circle was closing in on Trotsky. Despite official denials from the Mexican Communist Party, David Siqueros sent a letter to the press which declared 'The Communist Party, in mounting this attack was merely trying to hasten Trotsky's expulsion from Mexico; all enemies of the Communist Party can expect similar treatment.'²

It was no doubt only a matter of time before the amateurish security work at the house was overcome again and the assassins struck their target.

The house becomes a fortress

By this point, the Old Man, as Trotsky was affectionately known, was guarded by several members of the SWP who were seconded to Coyoacan for extended visits, armed and organised to act as sentries. Those guards included Jake Cooper, Walter O'Rourke, Charles Cornell and Harold Robbins. Another guard was Joseph Hansen, later a key leader of the SWP. He later described the new measures taken after the botched attempt in May:

The guard was increased, more heavily armed. Bullet proof doors and windows were installed. A redoubt was constructed with bomb-proof ceilings and floors. Double steel doors, controlled by electric switches, replaced the old wooden entrance where Robert Sheldon Harte had been surprised and kidnapped by the GPU assailants. Three new bullet-proof towers dominated not only the patio but the surrounding neighbourhood. Barbed wire entanglements and bomb-proof nets were being prepared.³

Hansen would go on to become a key leader of the SWP in the US. One of the US Trotskyists recommended professionalising the guard after the May attack. He proposed a new leader of the guard, Ray Rainbolt, a Sioux Indian by descent, an ex-soldier who had been the captain of the Minneapolis Teamsters. Trotsky vetoed the decision, unhappy with too many guards and with protection that he considered intrusive.⁴

At this point, around eight or nine people lived in the house permanently, including Trotsky, Natalia, their grandson Vsevolod (Seva) Platonovich Volkov, Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer and others. Sometimes as many as twenty people would be staying there. There were normally four or five guards. The stress of such a confined and overcrowded existence took its toll on Trotsky and Natalia's moods on occasion but it was quite remarkable how he continued with such a high volume of work. His most experienced secretaries and guards, like Jan Van Heijenoort, who had been with Trotsky for seven years on and off, tried to impose a strict regime of never allowing him to be alone with strangers or less well-known and reliable acquaintances but he found these security measures irksome, sometimes complaining 'You treat me as though I were an object.'

Ramón Mercader

The overall operation to assassinate Trotsky was masterminded and prepared by Pavel A. Sudoplatov, deputy director of the foreign department of the NKVD. In his memoirs, Sudoplatov claimed that, in March 1939, he had been taken by his chief, Lavrenti Beria, to see Stalin in person. Stalin told him that 'if Trotsky is finished the threat will be eliminated.'⁵ He received the direct order from Stalin 'Trotsky should be eliminated within a year.' He claimed in his biography that he personally selected Ramón Mercader for the task of carrying out the assassination⁶

After the failure of the Horse network, a second team, long prepared for its task, was sent into action. This was headed by Leonid Eitingon, formerly the deputy GPU agent in Spain and also directly involved in the kidnap and murder of Andreu Nin. He was joined in Mexico City by his GPU comrade and lover Caridad Mercader and her son Ramón, dedicated Stalinists and members of the Spanish CP. Ramón had served in the Republican army in the Spanish Civil War. The team was there to carry out a different strategy, that of using a lone assassin, pretending to be a disillusioned follower of Trotsky, hoping thereby to divert responsibility away from the Communist Party. Ramón Mercader was to carry out the most important task of all, the murder.

Mercader, under the direction of Eitingon, had been systematically developing contact with Trotsky's supporters since 1938, so that he could get close to Trotsky. Starting in Paris and calling himself Jacques Mornard, a Belgian businessman, he had sought out and formed a relationship with an American Trotskyist, Sylvia Ageloff. Using a forged Canadian passport with the name Franc Jacson, he followed her back to the USA. There they married and lived for some time in New York. Sylvia, who was a fluent Russian speaker, was asked to go to Mexico to help with secretarial duties. 'Jacson' went with her to Mexico City, 'on business'. He bided his time for several months, often travelling to the compound to pick her up but never going inside. He maintained his front as someone not very interested in politics, although still supportive of the Fourth International because of his relationship with Sylvia.

Through Sylvia Ageloff, Mercader began the slow and deliberate task of getting close to his target, first by ingratiating himself with Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer, Trotsky's French friends who had come to Mexico with Trotsky's grandson in August 1939. By carrying out small favours for them, for instance driving them around in his car, or running errands for them, he drew closer and closer to his intended target. However, Ageloff was always very careful about allowing him to have any contact with the household, as Deutscher points out:

'Sylvia was scrupulous enough never to bring 'Jacson' [Mercader] into Trotsky's home - she even told Trotsky that,

as her husband had come to Mexico on a false passport, his visit might needlessly embarrass Trotsky.⁷ Ageloff even had some concerns about him; when she tried to contact him at the business address that he gave her it turned out to be fictitious. When she confronted him, he explained that he had given her an old address and provided her with a new one. A friend visited it one day and was told that the office belonged to 'Jacson'. Relieved that his new story seemed to be true, she disregarded her suspicions.

Mercader's patience, biding his time on the fringes of the Trotsky circle, was to pay off in the long run. At one point, his hesitation at the doors to the house, and his reluctance to come in, was noticed by Trotsky who, not wanting to appear rude to 'Sylvia's husband', said that he should be invited into the house.⁸

Mercader visited the house in Coyoacan ten times, never trying to enter uninvited or being too forward in approaching Trotsky. He came closer to the guards, befriended them. Eventually, when he was invited in by the Rosmers, he had tea with Trotsky on two occasions. Hansen recalls one particular conversation;

'In a conversation with Jacson, in which Cornell and I participated, Trotsky asked Jacson what he thought of the 'fortress.' Jacson responded that everything seemed well done, but 'in the next attack the GPU will use other methods.' 'What methods?' one of us asked.'

Hansen recalled that Mercader just shrugged of this question. In the months before the attack, Mercader returned to the US 'on business' several times. Each time he returned, he seemed more distressed and nervous, and also began to try different avenues to get close to Trotsky. Trotsky had never liked him, finding him shallow and abrupt, but was willing to tolerate him because of his relationship to Sylvia. Mercader began to feign an interest in the Fourth International's politics and debates. He discussed the possibility of writing an article and asked if Trotsky would look at it when it was finished. Trotsky agreed.

Thus it was that Mercader came to the house on the 20th August with a typed manuscript of an article, a polemic against the 'third camp' position of Shachtman, the last great debate which Trotsky had participated in and which ended in a damaging split in the American Socialist Workers Party in April 1940. It was a very hot day. He saw Natalia in the garden and asked for a glass of water. She asked if he wanted to hand over his hat and coat, but he refused. In his hand, under the coat, he was clutching the ice pick that he intended to use as the murder weapon. He was also concealing a dagger and a pistol. He made his way unaccompanied into Trotsky's study. After the attack, the guards admitted that precautions had been put in place to search all visitors, and never to leave Trotsky alone with a guest, but these procedures had not been implemented. In an interview with Alan Woods in 2003, Trotsky's grandson admitted

'...the arrangements for Trotsky's defence were extremely defective. In the moment of truth, Lev Davidovich was left alone with a relative stranger who, incredibly, had been allowed by the guards to enter in August wearing a heavy raincoat, inside which were hidden an ice-pick, a long dagger and a pistol. The guards did not even bother to "frisk" him before allowing him into Trotsky's study. Such an elementary precaution would have been sufficient to have aborted the whole mission. But those who were supposed to be defending Trotsky did not take the most elementary precautions.'

With only the two of them in the office, Mercader stood behind Trotsky. As the Old Man began to read through the article, making corrections, he pulled out the ice pick and plunged it into Trotsky's head. Trotsky let out a loud shout. Mercader described it afterwards to the police 'I took the 'piolet'. I raised it up high. I shut my eyes and struck with all my strength ... As long as I live I can never forget his cry ...'

Natalia, in her memoirs, also describes a 'terrible soul-shaking cry' and rushed into the room. As the guards, too, entered, they saw that Trotsky had wrestled Mercader to the ground. Charlie Cornell rushed in with a pistol but Trotsky shouted to him 'No... impermissible to kill, he must be forced to talk.' Hansen, Robins and Cornell held Mercader down on the ground whilst the police were called. Natalia cradled Trotsky's head in her lap as they tried to stop the bleeding. Trotsky whispered to his wife that he loved her and said 'now it is done.' Trotsky, still conscious, was rushed to hospital in an ambulance accompanied by Natalia.

In the hospital, Hansen stood beside Trotsky's bed. The Old Man called him over and whispered his final message. The words were slow, staggered and difficult, he spoke them in English because Hansen spoke no Russian. "I am close to death from the blow of a political assassin ... struck me down in my room. I struggled with him ...we entered, talked about French statistics... he struck me ... Please say to our friends...I am sure of the victory of the Fourth International. Go forward." Natalia asked Hansen what her husband had said. Not wanting to upset her with what he knew would be some of Trotsky's final words he replied "He wanted me to make a note about French statistics" and left the room.

The doctors worked hard but his wound was too deep and his years too advanced. Trotsky died on August 21st. His body lay in state in something close to a state memorial ceremony between 22nd and 27th August. Around 300,000 people came to see him, some for the last time, many more for the first time. On the 27th, his body was cremated. He wanted his body destroyed, as Hansen describes it, so only his revolutionary ideas remained. The thought of being turned into a mummified corpse, like Lenin, was disgusting to the avowed materialist. His remains were buried in the grounds of the house in Coyoacan, the place that had been almost a prison, but also his final home, in the last years of his life.

With a blow from an ice pick, the Stalinists had struck down the man who had dedicated his entire adult life to the revolution. The "young eagle" who had woken Lenin up in the middle of the night when he first got to London, who had been made chair of the first Petrograd Soviet at the age of 25 during the 1905 revolution and had suffered prison and exile for the revolution. The regular speaker to huge crowds of workers at the Cirque Moderne. The man who had led the Military Revolutionary Committee, which overthrew the Provisional Government and realised the slogan of "All power to the Soviets!" The Bolshevik who had led the Red Army in the defence of the revolution, who had defeated the combined forces of the imperialists and the Whites. Lev Davidovitch Bronstein, known across the world as Leon Trotsky, was dead. He paid for what he believed in with his life, as his children and so many of his friends had.

On 28 August, the SWP organised a meeting in New York. James P Cannon, the party's senior leader, explained the importance of the ideas for which Trotsky had fought:

"He explained it to us many, many times. He once wrote: 'It is not the party that makes the program; it is the program that makes the party.' In a personal letter to me, he once wrote: 'We work with the most correct and powerful ideas in the world, with inadequate numerical forces and material means. But correct ideas, in the long run, always conquer and make available for themselves the necessary material means and forces.'"

Cannon continued, pointing to the continuity of revolutionary thought of Marx, through Lenin to Trotsky and to the Fourth international;

"Do you want a concrete illustration of the power of Marxist ideas? Just consider this: when Marx died in 1883, Trotsky was but four years old. Lenin was only fourteen. Neither could have known Marx, or anything about him. Yet both became great historical figures because of Marx, because Marx had circulated ideas in the world before they were born. Those ideas were living their own life. They shaped the lives of Lenin and Trotsky."

With purpose, Cannon spoke about his belief in the future, the hope he, and the other revolutionaries, placed in the younger generations:

"So will the ideas of Trotsky, which are a development of the ideas of Marx, influence us, his disciples, who survive him today. They will shape the lives of far greater disciples who are yet to come, who do not yet know Trotsky's name. Some who are destined to be the greatest Trotskyists are playing in the school yards today. They will be nourished on Trotsky's ideas, as he and Lenin were nourished on the ideas of Marx and Engels."

The fate of Mercader

Mercader was sent to prison for twenty years, the Mexican authorities were unhappy at Russian assassins operating in their country and wanted to make an example of him. His mother, herself a key agent in the GPU in Spain, connected to the secret police unit that specialised in "liquidating Trotskyists", was awarded a medal, as was Mercader, when he

eventually returned to Eastern Europe. [9](#)

According to National Security Agency files [10](#), Eitingon and others planned to try to break Mercader out of prison in 1944. That attempt obviously did not succeed. When he was finally released, in 1960, he flew to Havana, where he was welcomed by Fidel Castro's new government [11](#). After that, he flew to the USSR and was awarded the 'Hero of the Soviet Union' medal. He lived the rest of his life between Eastern Europe and Cuba. Celia Hart, a Marxist who identified with both the Cuban revolution and Trotskyism after the 1960s, was particularly horrified at the association of Mercader with her revolutionary home. 'I still lose sleep at night remembering that Mercader came to my country after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution.' [12](#)

The Stalinists had left a trail of death to get to Trotsky, to try to smash his ideas and his small organisation. Their victims included his two sons, Sergei and Leon Sedov, his former-wife and the person who won him to Marxism, Alexandra Lvovna, seven secretaries and the secretary of the Fourth International, Rudolf Klement. Perhaps as many as ten thousand Russian Left Oppositionists perished in the Great Purges or were shot at the onset of the Second World War. Hundreds of Trotskyists outside Russia would lose their lives in, during, and immediately after, the war.

This proves that the movement around Trotsky was not a cult or a simple band of 'followers'. They were critical thinking Marxists who, in Trotsky's fight against Stalin, saw the continuation of a Marxist policy in the face of unbridled political revision and brutal degeneration. The loss of Trotsky was not the coup de grace for the Left Opposition. What the assassination shows is that Stalin and his cohorts recognised that the efforts of Trotsky and the movement for the Fourth International represented a mortal danger to their regime in any moment of crisis. They moved, after 1936, to try to defame them by the political trials, then they moved to a policy of physical liquidation in 1937 [13](#). If Trotsky, his ideas and his followers, were as irrelevant as bourgeois authors like Robert Service claim, why did the Soviet state go to such lengths to liquidate so many of them?

Some years earlier, Trotsky had already explained his understanding of the purpose and significance of this last phase of his life, the one he considered the most indispensable despite it being one marked by seeming defeat and failure:

"If our generation has proven to be too weak to establish socialism on this earth, we will give its unstained banner to our children. The struggle which looms ahead by far supersedes the significance of individual people, factions and parties. It is a struggle for the future of all humanity. It will be severe. It will be long. Whoever seeks physical repose and spiritual comfort - let him step aside. During times of reaction it is easier to lean on the bureaucracy than on the truth. But for all those for whom socialism is not an empty phrase but the content of their moral life - forward! Neither threats, nor persecution, nor violence will stop us. Perhaps it will be on our bones, but the truth will triumph. We are paving the way for it, and the truth will be victorious. Under the terrible blows of fate I will feel as happy as during the best days of my youth if I can join you in facilitating its victory. For, my friends, the highest human happiness lies not in the exploitation of the present, but in the preparation of the future." [14](#)

Endnotes

[1:](#) Serge V and Sedova, N, The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, London 1975

[2:](#) *ibid* p260

[3:](#) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/hansen/1940/10/end.htm>

[4:](#) Patenaude, B. Stalin's Nemesis; The Exile and Murder of Leon Trotsky, London 2009, p247-248

[5:](#) *ibid* p138

[6:](#) New York Times September 28, 1996

[7:](#) Deutscher I, The Prophet Outcast, New York, 1963, p485.

[8:](#) Serge and Sedova, op cit p264

[9:](http://mexfiles.net/2008/08/21/21-august-1940-mexicos-most-famous-murder/) <http://mexfiles.net/2008/08/21/21-august-1940-mexicos-most-famous-murder/>

[10:](http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/_files/venona/1944/6jun_gnome.pdf) http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/_files/venona/1944/6jun_gnome.pdf

[11:](#) King D, Trotsky, A Pictorial Biography p164 has a picture of him boarding the boat to Cuba in 1960

[12:](http://www.marxists.org/archive/celia-hart/2004/socialisminonecountry.htm) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/celia-hart/2004/socialisminonecountry.htm>

[13:](#) Romerstein, H. and Breindel, E, The Venona Secrets p325

[14:](#) Rogovin, V Z, 1937: Stalin's Year of Terror Oak Park, Michigan, 1998 p138

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