The Assassination of Leon Trotsky

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On the 75th Anniversary of the death of Leon Trotsky, we present here a chapter of a hitherto unpublished work by Simon Hardy and Dave Stockton on the History of the Left Opposition and Fourth International

Living in a house in Coyoacan, in Mexico City, Trotsky was not only an exile but also a fugitive from the assassins of Stalin’s secret police, the NKVD. In fact, the ‘Peoples’ Commissariat of Internal Affairs’ was somewhat misnamed in that, especially since the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) it had developed an extensive network of agents in Western Europe and the Americas.

Trotsky had repeatedly been denounced in the Moscow trials of 1936-38 as the ultimate organiser and inspirer of crimes against the Soviet Union. It was only a matter of time before Stalin attempted to end his life. Indeed, in the very month that Trotsky moved into the house in Calle Viena, March 1939, Pavel Sudoplatov, head of the Special Tasks Administration of the NKVD, was taken by his chief Lavrenti Beria to see Stalin, Stalin told him ‘Trotsky should be eliminated within a year.’

In this, Stalin was simply adding the crowning crime to the vast slaughter of the Purges that had destroyed not only Lenin’s collaborators but also many of his own supporters in the period of degeneration of the Soviet state, including the most talented chiefs of the Red Army and countless totally innocent people.

Trotsky’s presence alone meant that Mexico City was riddled with NKVD agents. Many of them had come from Spain when Franco finally triumphed, because of the shared language. In fact, evidence has emerged that there were two active GPU networks in Mexico City, both of which were to be activated to carry out the assassination of Trotsky.

One network was called ‘Horse’, the codename for the famous Mexican muralist painter David Alfardo Siqueiros, a leading Communist Party member. Horse was handled by a GPU agent known as Iosif Gringulevich, who had been recruited by Alexander Orlov, a general in the NKVD. They were both members of the GPU ‘special unit’ which conducted the torture of the prominent leader of the POUM, Andreu Nin in Spain. Recalled to Moscow in the summer of 1938, in danger of being liquidated himself because of his knowledge of Stalin’s crimes, he defected, and actually tried to warn Trotsky about the agents closing in on him.

Siqueiros at this time was a rabid anti-Trotskyist, totally loyal to the Stalinists. He had the connections and could get others to help out in an attack. But what the GPU needed was a way into the house. On Mayday, the Stalinists organised a 20,000 strong march through Mexico City calling for the expulsion of Trotsky, some of the crowd also called for his death. The Stalinist policy was to apply maximum pressure on the Mexican government to expel the Russian dissident. Their press regularly attacked Trotsky, implicating him in either trying to destabilise the government or, alternatively, trying to influence the government in breach of his visa agreements.

At 4am on the morning of May 25th, Siqueiros’ gang struck. Dressed as policemen, 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 American guards, Robert Sheldon Harte opened the door. As they went into the courtyard, they set up machine gun posts and opened fire on the house, firing over 300 bullets through the windows and walls. Trotsky and Natalia threw themselves under the bed to take cover. Their 14-year old year old grandson did the same, only slightly injuring himself on the flying glass.
One of the attackers may even have gone 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, Otto Schüessler and Charles Curtiss, two of the secretary-guards were able to enter the house and get to Trotsky's family. By the time the smoke cleared, miraculously no one was seriously hurt, however, they soon 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 maintained, the price that would have been paid if this conspiracy had been uncovered would have been too damaging to the prestige of the Fourth International and jeopardised his stay in Mexico.

Soon, the police turned their attention to trying to find Harte. Here, a number of interesting details have subsequently been revealed. A number of sources have pointed to evidence which seems to point to Harte being an NKVD agent. Firstly, Harte's father, in an interview with the Mexican police, claimed 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 then he had been driven away in one of the cars.

More damaging are the claims made by some of the attackers, which also imply that Harte at least knew the attackers. 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 an unidentified French Jew, who had been one of the organisers of the attack, in a nervous and friendly manner.

Another account identifies the man as Iosif Gringlevich and describes a huge argument erupting between him and Harte, who became greatly agitated and upset. Harte was upset, claiming he had been told that the intention of the raid was only to destroy the archives. As they sped away, realising that the intention of the attack had in fact been to murder the Old Man, Harte felt betrayed. Presumably, the GPU decided that Harte was a loose cannon and could not be trusted to keep his mouth shut. His body was discovered a month later, shot and buried 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 truth may never be known, but whether Harte was an agent or not, it is clear that the circle was closing in on Trotsky. Despite official denials from the Mexican Communist Party, David Siqueiros 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.? 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 was guarded by several members of the SWP who were seconded to Coyoacan for an extended visit, armed and organised to act as sentries. Those guards included Jake Cooper, Walter O'Rourke, Charles Cornell and Robert Sheldon Harte. Another guard was Joseph Hansen, later a key leader of the SWP. He describes the new measures taken since 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.?
Hansen would go on to become a key leader of the SWP in the US after the Second World War, but his first meeting with Trotsky did not go well. Asked to drive some of the household around the city and into the desert, Hansen got hopelessly lost, leaving Trotsky asking if the young American was suited to his post in Mexico.

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 overbearing.

Everything was at stake, the death of the Old Man would be a disaster for the Fourth International, at that time suffering under the hammer blows of the inevitable repression of the Second World War. At this point, around eight or nine people lived in the house permanently, including Trotsky, Natalia, their grandson Vsevolod Platonovich Volkov, the Rosmers and others. Sometimes as many as twenty people would be staying there. There were normally four or so guards.

Ramon Mercader

After the failure of the Horse network, a second attempt was set into motion. The GPU turned to Ramon Mercader to carry out the most important task of all. It was clear that Cardenas would not shift on the question of deporting Trotsky, and the Communist Party had become embroiled in the May attack scandal after Siqueiros proudly admitted their involvement in the attack. The GPU turned to Mercader to finish the job.

Mercader spent a lot of time getting close to Trotsky. He had travelled to the US with Sylvia Ageloff, under a forged Canadian passport with the name Franc Jacson. They married and had spent time together in the New York before travelling to Mexico. He bided his time, waiting for months, often travelling to the compound to pick her up but never going inside. He maintained his front as someone who was uninterested in politics, although still a supporter of the Fourth International.

He made contact with other GPU agents who had been dispatched to Mexico to work with the Mexican CP to orchestrate the assassination. Ramon Mercader was not actively involved in the Mexican Communist Party, his undercover identity offered him time to act without any pressure from the police. Lynn Walsh writes;

"The campaign to prepare the Mexican CP for the murder of Trotsky was carried through by a number of Stalinist leaders already experienced in ruthlessly carrying out the orders of their master in Moscow: Siqueiros himself, who had been active in Spain, probably a GPU agent since 1928; Vittoria Codovila, an Argentinian Stalinist who had operated in Spain under [Colonel] Eitingon, probably involved in the torture and murder of the POUM leader Andreas Nin; Pedro Checa, a leader of the Spanish Communist Party in exile in Mexico, (his name was based on an acronym of the word CHEKA); and Carlos Contreras, (also known as Vittorio Vidali), who had been active with the GPU's 'Special Tasks Force' in Spain. Co-ordinating their efforts was the ubiquitous Colonel Eitingon."

The operation was masterminded and prepared by Pavel A. Sudoplatov, a senior officer in the GPU, based in Moscow. He claimed in his biography that he personally selected Ramon Mercader for the task of carrying out the assassination.

Through Sylvia Ageloff, Mercader began the slow and deliberate task of getting close to his target, first by ingratiated himself with Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer. By carrying out small favours, for instance driving the Rosmers around, 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.?? In fact, 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."

Mercader was a patient man, and bided his time on the fringes of the Trotsky circle in order to later gain access to the
Old Man. 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 visited the house in Coyoacan ten times, never trying to force his way in 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.

After a time, Mercader made his move. In the months before the attack, he had returned to the US repeatedly on business. 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, he found 'Jacson' 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 that he then asked Trotsky to look at. Trotsky agreed.

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. 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 icepick that he intended to use as the murder weapon. He was also concealing a dagger and a pistol when he made his way 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, he stood behind Trotsky. As the Old Man began to read through the article, making corrections, he pulled out the weapon and drove its point violently into Trotsky's head. Trotsky let out a loud cry. 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 also describes hearing a 'terrible soul-shaking cry' and rushed into the room. As the guards entered they saw that Trotsky had wrestled Mercader to the ground. Charlie Cornell rushed in with a pistol ? 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?.

In the hospital, Hansen stood beside Trotsky's bed. The Old Man called him over and whispered what would be some of his final words into his American comrade's ear. 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 probably be 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 was honoured by something close to a 'lying in state' between 22nd and 27th August. Around 300,000 people came to see him. On the 27th, his body was cremated. He wanted his body destroyed, as Hansen describes it, so only his revolutionary ideas remained. The very thought of mummification, such as Stalin had subjected the body of Lenin to, would have disgusted the avowed materialist. His ashes 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.

Thus, the Stalinists had struck down the man who had dedicated his entire adult life to the revolution. The young revolutionary who had woken up Lenin in the early morning 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. He had suffered three periods of prison and exile for the revolution. The Bolsheviks' most popular speaker amongst the proletariat at huge gatherings at the Cirque Moderne in Petrograd in 1917, he also led the Military Revolutionary Committee which organised the overthrow of the Provisional government and realised the Lenin's slogan; ?All power to the Soviets!?

Trotsky had overseen the formation of the Red Army and directed its defence of the revolution, when it defeated the combined forces of the imperialists and the Whites. So close to Lenin were his deeds in the Revolution and the Civil War Place that, for the best part of a decade, when foes and friends spoke of the October Revolution and the young Soviet State, they always referred to Lenin and Trotsky. Yet Trotsky was the most prominent victim of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution, declaring an intransigent opposition to Stalin whom he named ?the gravedigger of the revolution? and later described as Cain, the murderer of his brother.

For this opposition, he paid with his life, but so, too, did his children and many of his friends and comrades. Amongst his family killed by ?Cain Stalin? was his first wife Alexandra Sokolovskaia, who had won him to Marxism in 1897, and was shot in 1938. Then there was his apolitical son Sergei, shot in 1937, and Trotsky's closest political collaborator, his other son, Leon Sedov, almost certainly murdered by the NKVD in a Paris clinic in February 1938. Among his young political collaborators in the 1930s, those who were assassinated included Erwin Wolf; in 1937 on a mission to Spain, and Rudolf Klement, the secretary of the Fourth International, murdered in Paris in July 1938, whilst he was preparing its founding conference.

The SWP organised a meeting in New York on August 28th. Cannon gave a speech which, marked with the deep sense of loss of their political leader and guide, outlined the firmest convictions of the Fourth International leaders that their cause was true and just. Cannon explained how important the ideas that Trotsky fought for were:

?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 current 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.

Eitingon and others planned to try to break Mercader out of prison in 1944 according to National Security Agency files. That attempt obviously did not succeed. When he was finally released, in 1960, he flew to Havana, where he was welcomed by Castro's new government. After that, he flew to the USSR and was awarded a medal; the Hero of the Soviet Union. 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.

The Stalinists had left a trail of death to get to Trotsky, to try to smash his ideas and his small organisation. Two of his children, his ex-wife, seven of his secretaries, and finally the Old Man himself. This was without even counting the tens of thousands of Left Oppositionists who lost their lives in Russia. It is also not to count the many hundreds of Trotskyists who would lose their lives in the coming Second World War, killed by either the fascists or Stalinists.

The point was that the movement around Trotsky was not a cult or a simple band of 'followers' who were enamoured with him, as if he was a celebrity. 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 reaction. The loss of Trotsky was a heavy blow, indeed the heaviest imaginable, since he was the last survivor of the great generation of classical Marxists and revolutionaries. But it was not the killer blow that the Stalin hoped it would be, it was not the coup de grace for the Fourth International, tiny and persecuted as it was.

For decades to come, whilst the Stalinists flourished at the head of mass parties and even victorious bureaucratic revolutions; in China, Vietnam, Cuba, they presented the Trotskyists as a pathetic irrelevance. Academics and western commentators also concurred with this judgement. However, if Trotsky and the Trotskyists had really been no danger to Stalin why had he done everything he could since 1936, to try to defame them by the political trials and then moved to a policy of physical liquidation in 1937? Was it simply the paranoia of a deranged tyrant? If so, why did Stalin's successors continue this defamation of Trotskyism for fifty years? Why, in 1961, at a ceremony in the Kremlin, did Leonid Brezhnev award Ramon Mercader the Gold Star of the Order of Lenin for carrying out a special task, the murder of Trotsky.

It was quite simply because Trotsky represented the revolutionary spirit and liberating programme of the Bolshevik Party, of the October Revolution, of the first years of the Soviet state and the Communist International. He represented the tens of thousands of Left Oppositionists who fought the bureaucratic counter-revolution of Stalin and perished in the attempt. Last, but not least, he had developed Lenin's heritage in the struggles against fascism throughout the 1930s.

Embodied in the foundation in 1938 of the Fourth International and its programme, The Death Agony of Capitalism, this tradition, despite the political distortions and crimes that many so-called Trotskyists committed against it, remains a precious legacy for all those trying to rebuild revolutionary parties and a revolutionary International in the capitalist crises, wars and revolutions of the 21st century.