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Assassination of Trotsky

1990: The assassination of Trotsky

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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He claimed to be Belgian and that his name was Jacques Mornard. He was Catalan and his name was Ramon Mercader, Stalin guided his arm. On 22 August 1940, a mountaineer's ice pick smashed the skull of Leon Trotsky, a refugee in Mexico since 1937. The murderer told the police that his name was Jacques Mornard and that he was a Belgian citizen. Author of the assassination, he was not the only organizer. Thanks to his affair with the young Trotskyist Sylvia Ageloff, Trotsky's future assassin had succeeded in winning the confidence of those who watched over the safety of the famous exile. Under the name of Franck Jacson, he was received several times in the fortified house in Coyoacan (a suburb of Mexico City).

A few months before the assassination, a first attempt had failed. On 24 May 1940, at 4 a.m., a commando group of twenty men had managed to enter the house: for several minutes, they sprayed Trotsky's room with submachine guns and threw two incendiary grenades as well as a time bomb. Miraculously, there were no deaths or injuries. Trotsky and his wife threw themselves under the bed, their grandson Sieva did the same.

Who was Jacson? The Stalinist press was unleashed and spread the thesis that he had mounted the attack to attract attention and slander the Mexican Communist Party and Stalin. A month after the events, thirty people were behind bars, most of them CP members and former veterans of the Spanish Civil War. The person in charge was on the run: it was the famous painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, a former colonel in Spain, whom Trotsky believed had served the GPU since 1928. Subsequently, the investigation showed that Siqueiros and Franck Jacson had known each other since Spain.

The identity of Franck Jacson

Who was this Franck Jacson? It would take nearly ten years to unravel his true identity. In his pocket was a letter explaining the motives for his act: a disillusioned Trotskyist, he had become disgusted by the man and by his proposal to send him to the USSR to carry out sabotage, demoralize the Red Army and try to kill Stalin. To accomplish all of this he would have the support of a great power (it was the United States, for Trotsky could no longer be an agent of Hitler due to the German-Soviet Pact).

All these accusations were taken up by the various CPs for nearly forty years. In 1969, French Communist Party leader Léo Figuères used them again, in his book *Le Trotskysme, cet anti-léninisme*. When the photos of the murderer appeared in the press, several veterans of Spain (many had taken refuge in Mexico) thought they recognized the Communist militant Ramon Mercader. However, it was not until 1950 that we could be absolutely certain: taking advantage of a congress in Europe, a Mexican government criminologist went to Spain to investigate. He compared Jacson's fingerprints with those of the young Catalan Communist Ramon Mercader, arrested in June 1935: they were the same.

In 1953, the year of Stalin's death, on all official records, the name Mercader replaced that of Jacson-Mornard. The assassin's mother, Caridad Mercader, was a prominent activist in the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, attached to the Comintern. She was recruited for the GPU by Gerő, the future Hungarian Stalinist leader who then officiated in Spain. Through him, she became the mistress of GPU general Leonid Eitingon, a specialist in the liquidation of

suspect Soviet diplomats and dubious militants. Ramon Mercader served a 20-year prison sentence in Mexico, the maximum legally permitted. Upon release, in 1960, he went to Czechoslovakia via Cuba, then to Moscow where he had been made a “hero of the Soviet Union” and holder of the “Order of Lenin”. He was buried in Moscow in 1978 without ever having spoken.

Stalin's order

Stalin's authorship of the crime is now recognized by everyone, including the Soviets and the PCF. In 1978, Valentin Campa, former leader of the Mexican Communist Party, published his memoirs. He had been expelled in 1940 because he did not show enough enthusiasm in his party's involvement in the preparations for the assassination. In 1978 *L'Humanité* published a few extracts in which Campa confirms that it was indeed Stalin who gave the order to kill Trotsky. But he did not reveal anything that is not already known: in particular, he does not say who was the main organizer. Ironically, the old Stalinist Georges Fournial was responsible for presenting the document. However, as early as February 1938, Fournial had been denounced by the Trotskyist press as an agent of the GPU, having just obtained a six-month leave to go to Mexico to represent the Teaching Workers' International.

Despite everything, thanks to Valentin Campa, the old militants were able to learn, thirty-eight years late, that their beloved leaders were not only liars but also murderers. Of quite another interest will be the book on Trotsky which is about to be released in Moscow by General Volkogonov, director of the Institute of Military History of the USSR and recent biographer of Stalin. Interviewed by the *Stampa* correspondent (26 July 1990), he claims to have had access to numerous archives including those of Trotsky, Stalin and the NKVD. He claims to have the richest collection of documents concerning Trotsky: forty thousand exhibits, thousands of photos, dozens of testimonies. He published some of them, notably the order to kill Trotsky, dated September 1931 and signed by Stalin, Voroshilov, Molotov and Ordzhonikidze. It was renewed in 1934.

Volkogonov will finally reveal the name of the organizer of the assassination, who worked under the orders of Eitingon (the GPU general of whom Caridad Mercader was the mistress). This man is eighty-five years old and served fifteen years in prison at Khrushchev's initiative. Volkogonov managed to get him to talk. The first decision to kill Trotsky was taken in September 1931, but it was of a general nature, whereas in 1934 a special group was created to hunt Trotsky. The special group dealt with the liquidation of political opponents abroad, and not only of Trotsky. The NKVD octopus had its tentacles all over the place. It was a secret service within the secret service, created to fight against exiles who, in turn, fought against Stalin's regime. These people were dangerous for Stalin, because they knew a lot.

“A tragicomedy”

Faithful to Gorbachevian thought, Volkogonov, who does not hide his admiration for several aspects of Trotsky's personality (and in particular his anti-Stalinism from the 1920s), has an essential grievance against him. “He was trapped in a big misconception, the idea of world revolution. Even a week before his death, he wrote that he believed in the victory of the world revolution.” Yes, comrade general, he had this culpable weakness which he shared with Lenin, the subject of your next book. On the other hand, as early as 1935, Stalin told Roy Howard that the idea that the USSR could encourage world socialist revolution was a “tragicomedy”. Perhaps you will one day understand that, if you can now congratulate yourself on being able to write freely, if Stalin's followers have been swept away almost everywhere in Europe, it is because the tragicomic “big misconception” has not finished being talked about.

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