

Why Leon Trotsky agreed to testify before the Dies commission in 1939

2 April 1999

To the WSWWS editor:

Shannon Jones, in a review of Ellen Schrecker's *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, correctly points out that Schrecker "levels a serious and utterly false charge against Trotsky." Jones refutes Schrecker's implication that when Trotsky, in October 1939, accepted an invitation to testify before the US House Un-American Activities Committee, he acted "out of a desire to aid the red-baiters." But Jones lets another insidious element of Schrecker's falsification stand unrefuted.

Schrecker falsely claims that (1) Trotsky "had to postpone his appearance because of the State Department's refusal to give him a visa," and (2) Trotsky "was about to give a deposition to a member of the HUAC staff when he was assassinated." She then "wonders" what Trotsky "would have said" in his deposition and finds it "even more interesting to speculate what would have been done [by the US government] with his statement." Her insinuation is that Trotsky could, and would, have provided the House Committee with secret information on the names and activities of Stalinist operatives in the United States and other countries, and that, therefore, the assassination of Trotsky by some of these operatives amounted to an act of self-defense.

Schrecker lifts her version of Trotsky's relations with the House Un-American Activities Committee almost verbatim from the one source she cites in her notes, Constance Aston Myers' *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928-1941*. Myers speculates on the motivations of the Stalinists behind the assassination of Trotsky in these words:

"Trotsky simply knew too much. For one thing, the Dies Committee [HUAC] in October 1939 had invited him to testify before it, and he had accepted. True, before the scheduled date of appearance, November 12, because the state department refused Trotsky a visa the committee first postponed, then rescinded, the invitation. Nonetheless J. B. Matthews, chief investigator, planned a trip to Mexico to take a deposition from him, and of course Trotsky intended to disclose what he knew of the Soviet secret police's control of world Communist parties. For another thing, Trotsky was putting together his defense against libel charges brought by the communist party of Mexico, a further opportunity to bring to light the collection of affidavits and other records he had collected for years on the

secret police's operations."

The one and only source that Myers cites in her notes in support of her version of these events is the 1969 edition of the *Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1939-40*. But Trotsky, in these writings, completely refutes her misrepresentations. He explained in a statement issued in December 1939 that the Dies Committee had invited him to present testimony on the "history of Stalinism" and on the accusations against him presented to the Committee by Stalinist witnesses. American newspapers had published the false information that Trotsky would provide the Committee with documentary evidence on the activities of Mexican and Latin American Stalinists. Trotsky replied that he "never had ... a single document concerning the activities of the Latin-American Communists" and would limit his testimony before the Committee to the topics stated in the invitation.

Myers', and Schrecker's, assertion that the House Committee retracted its invitation to Trotsky because the US State Department had refused him a visa is a complete fabrication. HUAC Chairman Martin Dies concocted a similarly fictitious story at the time when, on December 12, he cancelled the invitation because, he said, he could obtain no "assurances from Mexico that Trotsky would be permitted to return." The fact is, such assurances were provided to the US consul in Mexico by the Mexican government. Trotsky concluded that Mr. Dies had cancelled his testimony because of political not technical considerations. He had informed the Committee's Chief Investigator, Mr. Matthews, that his "political aims of course had nothing in common with the reactionary political aims of Mr. Dies, [and] that the only thing [he] could promise was to speak the truth." He planned to oppose any repressive laws against the US Communist Party. This, Trotsky believed, "was the reason why Mr. Dies dropped his plan."

When HUAC Chairman Dies decided not to have Trotsky come to the United States, he announced that he might send an investigator to Mexico to "take Trotsky's statement." Trotsky replied that he had "never invited" such an investigator but had "agreed only to make a public deposition" before the House Committee. Less than a week later, he published a statement in which he denied that he was "now answering questions put to me by Mr. Matthews" from the Dies Committee. He repeated his readiness to be a witness before the Committee "in order to give the American public correct information" about Stalinism

and his opposition to it. But, he insisted, "I never accepted and I don't accept any invitation to discuss these questions with Mr. Dies or Mr. Matthews behind closed doors." In his statement *Why I Consented to Appear Before the Dies Committee*, which he planned to release when he arrived in the United States, he declared that "the open truth is the sharpest weapon against" the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union and the Communist International.

"It is just this task which I have taken upon myself--to tell the truth about the activities of the Kremlin and the Comintern. I do not promise any sensational revelations. But they are not necessary. What new revelations could surpass the proceedings of the Moscow trials, the liquidations of the Old Bolshevik Guard, the liquidation of the Red Generals, the sudden alliance with Hitler, and the scandalous zigzags of the Comintern under the whip of the Kremlin? I can help to assemble all the different parts of this picture into one whole and to disclose its internal meaning."

Trotsky planned to set forth a Marxist analysis of the publicly available history of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist regime in both the Soviet Union and the Third International in his presentation before the House Committee. This testimony would have educated workers in the "reactionary historical role of Stalinism" and helped them to liberate themselves from any confidence in its politics. "In order to help the workers in this," Trotsky concluded, "I agreed to appear before the Dies Committee." One does wonder what the Committee would have done with such a statement.

Trotsky did adduce evidence on the "Soviet secret police's control of world Communist parties" in an article (on *The Comintern and the GPU: The Attempted Assassination of May 24 and the Communist Party*) that he completed on August 17, 1940, three days before his assassination. This article, not published until November 1940, is evidently the basis of Myers' claim that Trotsky had started to prepare his "defense against libel charges brought by the communist party of Mexico" (actually against a "defamation" complaint filed by the Stalinist newspaper *La Voz de Mexico*) with the use of "affidavits and other records he had collected for years on the secret police's operations." Trotsky had affirmed in a Mexican court that the editors of *La Voz de Mexico* were in the pay of the Soviet secret police (GPU). His article set out his proof of this claim. But the records and affidavits that he cited consisted entirely of published articles from this same newspaper and other pro-Stalinist publications, widely available books published by ex-Stalinists (former members of various Communist parties and ex-agents of the Comintern and/or the GPU), and letters sent to his attorney by a few of these authors that largely repeated, in the form of testimony, some of the facts already available in these books. He had no covert intelligence. Trotsky kept no secrets from the international working class. He always published, as a matter of revolutionary principle, any information he had on the role of the Stalinists in the labor

movement as soon as it became available. In any case, if the GPU had really feared what Trotsky might "bring to light" about its activities and operations, in a public trial, it need only have ordered its employees, who had filed the charges with the court, to withdraw them.

Myers and Schrecker revive the Stalinist slanders of the time that Trotsky, from his place of exile in Mexico, was engaged in "espionage in the service of all the counterrevolutionary forces," and specifically that he was "an agent of the Dies Committee." These slanders, Trotsky pointed out, were the "moral" preparation of public opinion in the Stalinist newspapers that started at the same time as the political and technical preparation of his assassination. Myers and Schrecker evidently believe, and would have us believe, that these absurd lies tell us the true motivations of the Stalinists behind Trotsky's murder. Stalin, and his cohorts, feared not Trotsky's "affidavits and records" but his Marxism, his revolutionary leadership, his party, his criticism, his authority. This is how Trotsky explained why Stalin had ordered his murder:

"In the capacity of a former revolutionist Stalin remembers that the Third International was incomparably weaker at the beginning of the last war than the Fourth International is today. The course of the war may provide a mighty impulsion to the development of the Fourth International, also within the USSR itself. That is why Stalin could not have failed to issue orders to his agents--to finish me as quickly as possible."

Stalin dreaded what Trotsky would tell the international proletariat in the course of a new world war, not what he would tell a bourgeois parliamentary committee or a bourgeois court.

Fraternally,

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