Trapped in Moscow: Exile and Stalinist Persecution, by Reinhard Müller

Stalin’s persecution of German communists

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For many communists their flight from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union was to prove a fatal trap. In his hatred against Lenin’s old guard, Stalin did not spare the political émigrés. Taking the fictitious “counterrevolutionary Trotskyist-terrorist organization” around Erich Wollenberg and Max Hoelz as a case in point, Reinhard Müller’s recent book provides a thorough documentation illuminating the persecution of communists in the USSR—its structures, mechanisms and methods.

Prior to 1989, the closure of the Russian archives prohibited any thorough research into the “blank spots” of the history of Stalinism. Although the essential structures and methods of Stalinist rule had been uncovered, it was often impossible to trace in detail the course taken by the official inquiries or the techniques that were employed.

When the archives opened in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, numerous details emerged about the intentions, scope, structures and forms of the purges that had hitherto remained unknown. At the same time, the newly accessible files revealed the horrifying dimensions of the Great Terror—in particular the Stalinist practice of torture. In essence, the facts that have emerged vindicate the profound analysis regarding the purpose and mechanisms of the Stalinist purges elaborated first and foremost by Leon Trotsky.

It is a basic characteristic of Stalinism that its persecution was directed above all against members, leaders and officials of the ruling (Communist) party, who were witch-hunted and murdered. However, the Stalinist terror was not limited to communists bearing CPSU membership cards, but included members and functionaries of foreign communist parties who, having fled Hitler’s henchmen, applied for asylum in the Soviet Union. Those who had hoped that Stalin’s empire would protect them from pursuit and persecution frequently fell victim to a deadly illusion.

Everyday life of the political émigrés in Moscow was dominated by permanent surveillance, spying on one another and traumatic anxiety. In 1935-36, a first wave of prosecution of German communists singled out those members who had been stigmatized as “conciliators”. In its own plans, the Stalinist secret police, the NKVD, proceeded to unite these “right-wingers” with the “Trotskyists” in a fictitious “right-Trotskyist bloc”. At the same time, the NKVD managed to uncover bogus fascist plots, for example, on the editorial board of the *Deutsche Zentral-Zeitung*.

An instruction by People’s Commissioner for Domestic Affairs Nicolai I. Yeshov prompted the NKVD to step up the persecution of Trotskyists. All “former Trotskyists” were to be tracked down and liquidated. The ensuing wave of arrests was intended, amongst other things, to prepare the planned show trial against the “Trotskyist-Zinovievist center” which was eventually held in August 1936. Following various directives of the NKVD on the initiative of Stalin and the Politbureau, in early 1936 this intensified search for Trotskyists was extended to the German political émigrés in the Volga Republic.

In the spring of 1936 the NKVD finally succeeded in uncovering a “Trotskyist plot”. They constructed a “counterrevolutionary, Trotskyist-fascist, terrorist organization” around Willi Leow. Using confessions gained under torture and the principle of guilt by association, 47 individuals and six groups were eventually classified as belonging to this plot. Similar groups were “uncovered” by the NKVD in Leningrad, Moscow and the Ukraine. In March 1938, when the Great Terror had reached its peak, as high as 70 percent of the KPD (German Communist Party) members in the Soviet Union had been moved from their exile accommodations to a jail cell of the Stalinist secret police.

With the bogus “counter-revolutionary Trotskyist-terrorist” organization around Erich Wollenberg and Max Hoelz, the fictitious plots constructed by the NKVD on Stalin’s orders assumed exceptionally monstrous dimensions.

On the basis of the cadre files in Moscow and the investigation files of the NKVD, Reinhard Müller, who is employed by the Institute for Social Studies in Hamburg (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung), has reconstructed the history of the “Wollenberg-Hoelz plot” and researched the destiny of those who had been implicated by the NKVD. Their fate was typical of the political émigrés in the Soviet Union and throws some light on the collaboration of the persecuting bureaucracies—NKVD, Communist International and KPD—against oppositional communists.

On March 5, 1933, the victory of Hitler and his allies, the German Nationals, in the Reichstag elections underscored the defeat of the workers movement in Germany. On that very evening, a group of KPD members gathered in the Moscow apartment of Elsa and Hermann Taubenberger to listen to the private radio of Taubenberg (who was an engineer) and to discuss the election results.

Among those present were the KPD military expert Erich Wollenberg, the musician Konstantin Siebenhaar (a German from the Volga Republic), Werner Rakow, a former supporter of the Left Opposition who had led the illegal information service of the KPD in 1923, and KPD members Hans Schiff, Peter Schiff, Karl Schmidt and Erich Tacke. Werner Rakow, who had adopted the party name Felix Wolf, had already been arrested in the Soviet Union in 1928 but, after signing a statement of repentance, was readmitted into the party together with the “group of 38”.

Some participants in this election night meeting knew each other from the Soviet Republic of Munich, which had been brutally suppressed in 1919 by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leadership with the help of the Reichswehr and the fascistic Freikorps. It seems that some critical remarks were made that night about the policies of the party leadership in Berlin. At any rate, one of those attending, Hans Schiff, made a lengthy denunciation of the discussion and alleged comments by

his former comrades-in-arms from Bavaria. Schiff's denunciation was followed by an official party investigation in the course of which the NKVD, in 1935, targeted several people who had been present at the election night meeting. Wollenberg and Rakow had already been expelled from the KPD in April 1933.

The secret police, at that time led by Yagoda, took this meeting as the starting point for the invention of a "counterrevolutionary Trotskyist-terrorist organization" centred around the KPD military expert Wollenberg and the workers' hero Max Hoelz. The "proletarian Robin Hood", as Hoelz was called in party circles, had come into conflict with the party apparatus soon after his arrival in the USSR. He was too much of an individualist and a rebel to put up with constant bossing about by the Stalinist bureaucracy. After being refused permission to leave the USSR, he committed the mortal sin of contacting the German embassy in Moscow. Soon after, in September 1933, he died under mysterious circumstances near Nizhny Novgorod.

The denunciations and accusations by the NKVD centred on Wollenberg as the hub of all conspiratorial connections. Wollenberg, son of a patriotic member of the medical corps and army doctor, had volunteered for the First World War, received several prestigious medals and been promoted to the position of second lieutenant. In November 1918, as leader of the security service and the navy in Königsberg, he actively participated in the German revolution.

After the strike in the Ruhr, in September 1923, he was given the top position in the KPD's military apparatus in southwest Germany. As Wollenberg was wanted for "high treason, murder and violation of the explosive substances act" following the failure of the "German October" (1923), the Central Committee of the KPD sent him to the Soviet Union, where he was assigned, amongst other things, to the general staff of the Red Army.

After an amnesty enabled him to return to Germany, he joined the national leadership of the illegal "Red Front" militia (Rotfrontkämpferbund, RFB), became the leader of the RFB's department for political agitation and wrote for its newspaper *Rote Front*.

Wollenberg spoke up at a Nazi meeting in Berlin on June 2, 1932 and was beaten up by storm troopers and severely injured. After his recovery he addressed several letters to the Central Committee of the KPD criticizing "criminal neglect" regarding arrangements for his protection by the KPD and the RFB. His protest was directed, amongst others, against the political secretary of the KPD in Berlin, Walter Ulbricht.

Ulbricht and Herbert Wehner, at that time an official of the Central Committee, began an investigation directed against Wollenberg, which led to a reprimand by the party and his subsequent dismissal from the editorial board of the *Rote Fahne*. In autumn 1932, Wollenberg moved in with Erich and Zenzl Mühsam in Berlin, whom he knew from his time in Munich and his joint imprisonment with Erich Mühsam in Niederschönenfeld. On Wilhelm Pieck's recommendation, in late 1932 he finally obtained an entry permit to the Soviet Union.

In Moscow, Wollenberg worked as an editor for the German edition of Lenin's *Collected Works*. In early 1933, however, he was already appealing to the KPD leadership to recall him to Germany, but his requests were turned down. In late February 1933, Wollenberg met Karl Gröhl, a Trotskyist, in Moscow. Soon after, Gröhl hastily fled the Soviet Union. Shortly before he left, he left a letter addressed to Stalin and Pyatnitsky at the mailroom of the Comintern. In this letter, he sharply criticized the Central Committee and the Moscow office of the KPD for its false policy towards National Socialism.

Soon after his expulsion from the KPD, Wollenberg fled to Prague. The year was 1934. Wollenberg was then demonised as a leading Trotskyist enemy of the USSR.

In November 1933, Gröhl published a further letter to Pyatnitsky (together with an obituary on Max Hoelz) in the Trotskyist newspaper *Unser Wort* (Our Word), which was published in Prague. Again, Gröhl sharply criticised the policy of the KPD, the Comintern and the Soviet Union and publicly declared his break with the official Communist Party and the Comintern. In blunt terms, he also described the reasons for the expulsion of Wollenberg and Rakow from the KPD: "Both comrades voted against the resolution of the ECCI [Executive Committee of the Communist International] on the situation in Germany. They stated that not only the KPD, but also the Comintern had to be rebuilt on new foundations."

As the leadership in Moscow and Berlin, stubbornly disregarding the facts, clung to the expectation of a "revolutionary upswing" in the "struggle for Soviet Germany", any comment suggesting a "defeat of the German workers movement" was considered "defeatist" and "anti-party", allegedly betraying a "disbelief in the power of the working class". Critics within the ranks of the KPD, Müller writes, were "expelled as 'objective agents' of the class enemy, disciplined in rituals of penance or ... 'whipped back into line' in the course of 'days of discussion'."

As late as 1934, the Comintern and the KPD promoted the "general line" that Germany was approaching revolution, and continued to propagate the fight against "social fascist" Social Democracy. In 1933 Trotsky had been the most vehement critic of the policy pursued by the Comintern leadership in Moscow and the KPD: "They denounce as 'defeatists' not those who have brought about the defeat—then they would have to denounce themselves—but those who strive to draw the necessary conclusions from this defeat." [1] Similar criticisms were made, based on Trotsky's analysis of fascism, by the Trotskyist journals *Unser Wort* [2] and *Neue Weltbühne*.

Following Gröhl's public statement, the Stalinist secret police definitively branded Wollenberg, Rakow and Hoelz to be dangerous Trotskyist enemies of the state. A list drawn up by the NKVD named 70 individuals or "contacts" who, according to the principle of guilt by association, were arrested, interned in labour camps or shot in Moscow as members of the imaginary Wollenberg-Hoelz organisation.

One of the victims, the former KPD official and editor-in-chief of the party organ *Rote Fahne*, Werner Hirsch, had been arrested in Berlin as early as March 3 and had suffered an agonizing ordeal during his odyssey through the torture chambers of the SA and the Gestapo. Immediately upon his arrival in the deceptive safety of his exile, Hirsch (like many other KPD officials who had been released from concentration camps) was placed under suspicion of being a "potential spy", a "deviant" or a "Gestapo agent" working for Hitler.

A commission of inquiry by the KPD—which included the future head of the SPD faction in the post-war West German parliament, Herbert Wehner—established close connections between Hirsch and Erich Mühsam's widow in Prague, who in turn had "close relations" to the "leading Trotskyist" Erich Wollenberg. Hirsch was interned in NKVD prisons and tortured. Although he demonstrated his unconditional loyalty to the party by admitting certain early sins as a party member, he was eventually sentenced to 10 years in a prison camp based on confessions forced out of him. He died on November 10, 1937 from ailments arising from his internment by the NKVD.

The most prominent victims of the bogus "bloc" constructed by the Stalinists were, together with Hirsch, Kreszenzia ("Zenzl") Mühsam, the widow of the anarchist poet Erich Mühsam (who was tortured to death by the Nazis in the Oranienburg concentration camp) and Carola Neher, an actress in Brecht's theatre. Together with Carola Neher, Zenzl Mühsam, who had been a friend of Wollenberg for many years, had aroused suspicion since the days of Zenzl's exile in Prague. She had come to Moscow because she hoped to be able to bring out the unpublished works of Erich Mühsam. She enjoyed the special protection of Yelena Stasova, the leader of the MOPR (International Organization to Support the Fighters of the Revolution).

Confronted with the delaying tactics of the Stalinist bureaucracy, who were certainly not interested in publishing the works of the anarchist and critic of the KPD, Erich Mühsam, and disgusted by the reality of "socialism in a single country", which consisted of constant control and ubiquitous surveillance, she increasingly distanced herself from Stalin's state. When she openly voiced her criticisms within the émigrés' circles, she came under fire by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Despite strong international protest, she was arrested three times over the next 20 years and eventually banned before she was able to emigrate to East Germany in 1955. In the GDR, she was "looked after" by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and spied on by the secret police.

Following denunciations by the prominent German director Gustav von Wangenheim (who, incidentally, was a very diligent informer), Carola Neher, who was employed as an actress in his theatre group "Left Column", was arrested on July 25, 1936 in Moscow and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in a labour camp. She died on June 26, 1942 in the Sol-Ilzek prison near Orenburg.

In many respects, the methods employed against oppositionists under Stalinism were reminiscent of the medieval Inquisition. This analogy had already been pointed out by Trotsky and by Bukharin, himself one of the accused in the major show trial of 1938. Müller writes: "Obligation to inform to the police, guilt through contact, liability of the family for the crimes of one of its members, a system of denunciations and informers, extensive use of torture in order to force confessions, secret investigations and public show trials are common to both the medieval Inquisition and the Stalinist terror."

Denunciations and the official files on political dissenters served as the basis for dossiers and blacklists of "diseased elements", which were then forwarded by the cadre department of the Communist International to the Stalinist secret police.

Herbert Wehner, who had intensively spied on the "Trotskyists" while still in Prague and had sent lengthy reports to the KPD leadership in Moscow, was among those who, following his arrival in Moscow in 1937, readily collected information on oppositionists like Zenzl Mühsam, Erich Wollenberg and other political émigrés. With Wehner's arrival in Moscow, according to Müller, "the official smear campaign against Zenzl and Mühsam, amongst others, took on new dimensions".

As a "guardian of ideological virtue", Wehner, "with his typical obtrusiveness", denounced both the "Trotskyists" and their "social democratic accomplices" in several public and secret reports, which he submitted not only to the authorities of the Comintern and KPD leadership, but also, in 1937, to the NKVD in the Lubyanka prison. In line with the official condemnation of Trotskyism issued by Dimitrov, Pieck and Togliatti, Wehner, who was to become a leading social democrat in West Germany, campaigned against "those despicable, filthy Trotskyist agencies of Hitler fascism ... who try to weaken the power of the socialist state, just as they attempt to paralyze and destroy the workers movement in the capitalist countries." [3]

According to Müller, it is quite unlikely that the gathering on the occasion of the German elections on March 5, 1933 had been organized as "a conspiratorial meeting of oppositional Trotskyists", as "claimed by the authorities as well as by the Trotskyist press for their respective political purposes". He doesn't exclude, however, that "due to disappointment over the defeat of the German workers movement and the illusions of the military experts and strategists of the uprising quartered in distant Moscow ... a few critical remarks may have been made on the policies of the KPD leadership in Berlin".

"But no organized group of supporters of Trotsky existed, either in Prague or among the KPD officials in Moscow" in 1933, Müller writes.

While Müller himself presents some evidence pointing to the existence of organised Trotskyist groups within the Stalinist-ruled Soviet Union, he simply denies that they had any political significance. Müller categorically rejects the account by Vadim Rogovin, who has thoroughly documented and analyzed the activities of these circles. [4] He accuses Rogovin of uncritically repeating the groundless accusations of the NKVD: "The Stalinist accusations of 'Trotskyist plots' have recently been taken up and cited by Vadim Rogovin to prove the existence of an extended and active Trotskyist opposition." [5]

Significantly, Müller does not attempt to support his accusations against Rogovin with factual arguments.

Müller's reproach is wrong because Rogovin in no way accepts or adopts the Stalinist version of events. By quoting documents that demonstrate that there were, even during the peak of the Stalinist terror, oppositional circles influenced by the ideas of Trotsky, Rogovin merely uncovers the rational kernel behind the Stalinist apparatus' monstrous falsifications and frame-ups.

The accusations of cooperation of Trotskyist "terrorists" with "the German secret service"—as well as supposed acts of sabotage (terrorist acts involving poison or murder, inevitably scotched by the Soviet authorities at the last minute), etc.,—were all rejected by Rogovin as paranoid fiction. On the other hand, by probing the work of Trotskyists under Stalinism, the Russian historian was able to establish the intellectual and organizational continuity of Trotskyism in the USSR, which not even Stalin's exterminating terror was able to stamp out completely.

Rogovin has now been largely supported by the renowned specialist on Soviet Studies, Hermann Weber, professor at the Centre for European Social Studies in Mannheim (Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung). Weber doubts that Trotskyism still existed as a political force in 1937-38, arguing that "for Stalin, this term served as an 'argument' to label every 'deviant', every alleged or real opponent as a 'mortal enemy'."

Weber adds, "Secondly, we use the term 'Trotskyism' for a conscious turn by oppositionists to the ideas of Trotsky, and, thirdly, there were the organized groups of real Trotskyists."

Weber agrees with Rogovin when he states: "This, however, does not detract from the essential significance of 'Trotskyism' under Stalinism, and there were indeed oppositional groups. Rogovin's argument, which is to interpret the terror as a radical break with communist ideology and with the ideas of Lenin, remains an important aspect in the historiography of communism." [6]

Müller's ignorant attitude towards the Trotskyist opposition in the USSR does not negate the value of his book, which is an important contribution toward an exploration of the fate of political émigrés from Germany under Stalinism, and adds to our knowledge of the structure and methods of the Stalinist purges.

Notes:

1. "Deutsche Perspektiven" ("German Perspectives"), in *Die neue Weltbühne*, 1933, no. 30, p. 920)

2. First among them was Willy Schlamm, e.g., in "Leninism and Stalinism"

3. Kurt Funk (Herbert Wehner): "Mobilize for world peace and against the fascist war mongers on May 1st", in: *Rundschau über Politik, Wirtschaft und Arbeiterbewegung*, 6, 1937, no. 17, p. 662

4. Vadim S. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, Mehring Books, 1998

5. Müller, *Menschenfalle*, p. 134

6. Hermann Weber/Ulrich Mählert (eds.): *Terror: Stalinistische Parteisäuberungen 1936-1953* (revised special edition), Paderborn, 2001

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