Frida Kahlo retrospective in Berlin—Part 2: Frida Kahlo and communism

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The following is the second of a two-part article. The first part was posted September 10.

Toward the end of the 1920s, the Mexican government was still allowing artists a certain amount of political freedom. In 1928, Diego Rivera was able to commemorate communists as mural subjects in the Ministry for Public Education to celebrate the coming transition to socialism. Frida is seen at the centre of this painting, wearing a red shirt with a red star and handing out weapons. She joined the Communist Party of Mexico (PCM) that year.

This was the period of Stalin's sustained attacks on the Left Opposition, Trotsky's expulsion from the USSR, and the imposition of the anti-Marxist policy of "socialism in one country" on the various sections of the Comintern. Can anything of this atmosphere be sensed in Rivera's picture? It presents Frida as an activist in the revolution. The artist and muralist David Siqueiros, depicted on the left side of the picture, keeps a low profile and appears an detached observer. In real life he was to develop into a zealous Stalinist.

When Rivera was expelled from PCM in 1929, the year of their marriage, Frida followed him. During his stay in the Soviet Union, he had already come into conflict with party functionaries over cultural and political matters, which led the Stalinist government "to advise him to return to Mexico", as Andrea Kettenmann writes in a biography of Rivera. The latter was expelled from the Mexican party, after receiving several commissions from the government and accepting an assignment from the US ambassador to Mexico, Dwight W. Morrow, to paint a mural in the former Cortéz Palace of Cuernavaca.

In the midst of the Stalinist campaign "against deviants and reconcilers", Rivera failed to measure up to the phony "proletarian cultural" ideal of the artist who subordinates his artistic freedom to the party's political line. Ten years later, together with Leon Trotsky and the surrealist André Breton, he was to collaborate on *For an Independent Revolutionary Art* (1938), a manifesto directed against Stalinism and other reactionary forces.

The year 1929 was also marked by social instability. The Mexican government of Emilio Portes Gil tried to consolidate state power by setting up a catch-all alliance, the National Revolutionary Party (PNR). The military putsch that followed was unsuccessful. Then the Communist Party was banned. In autumn, the New York stock exchange crashed. An assassination attempt on the new Mexican president, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, failed in early 1930.

In the wake of the anti-communist hysteria, a hate campaign was launched against dissident intellectuals and artists, the serious consequences of which (detention, deportation, murder) forced many of them to leave the country. In 1930, Kahlo and Rivera also fled for a few years to the United States, where they moved mainly in artistic and upper middle class circles.

Frida developed "quite a rage against all the rich people there", but the Mexican Stalinists, with utter cynicism, made the couple's travels a scandal and a pretext, smearing Rivera as an "agent of North American imperialism and the millionaire, Morrow".

While in the US, Rivera and Kahlo became acquainted with the ideas of the anti-Stalinist Left Opposition, and its leader, Leon Trotsky. On their initiative—but with the state's proviso that he refrain from political engagement—Trotsky was admitted into the country in 1937 by the Mexican government of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río as an exile in Frida's parental home, the Blue House in Coyoacán. Frida Kahlo's contact with Trotsky, which certainly would have been characterised by intensive political and cultural exchange, was presented inanely and sensationally in the exhibition.

At this time, in 1937, Trotsky was preparing for his appearance before an independent commission of inquiry headed by John Dewey. He wanted to publicly refute Stalin's monstrous accusations against him. This political offensive was qualitatively deepened a year later with the founding of the Fourth International. In 1939, the Hitler-Stalin pact—against which Trotsky had long been warning—further revealed Stalin's counter-revolutionary role. The Comintern and its supporters were thrown into crisis.

By failing to mention any of this, the exhibition ignores the fact that Rivera and Kahlo actively sided with Trotsky in his struggle against Stalinism. The exhibition also fails to use its placards and notes to indicate that Trotsky was one of the most important leaders of the Russian Revolution.

One significant individual is mentioned, but only by name. According to the exhibition notes, a woman breastfeeding a child in the picture *The Bus* (1929) is said to be Tina Modotti. The commentary only describes her as a sort of matchmaker who brought Diego and Frida together. Modotti (1896-1942) was an American communist of Italian descent, and a photographer who probably introduced her friend, Frida Kahlo, into the Communist Party.

In January 1929, Modotti's friend, Julio Antonio Mella, a Cuban student leader, communist and intellectual focus for left-wing critics of Stalin, was shot in broad daylight, probably by order of the Cuban government. Modotti's photo of Mella's typewriter, with a sheet of paper bearing a quotation from Trotsky—as was pointed out by

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Elisabeth Weyer in her documentary film, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary* (1996)—has become iconic.

Modotti is an example of how the Mexican and Russian revolutions inspired young artists. However, she is also a tragic example of the many artists who came under the sway of Stalinism and paid a terrible price. Modotti worked for Stalin's KGB (the Soviet secret service) from the mid-1930s, and was associated with the Italian Stalinist functionary Vittorio Vidali, who as early as 1927 had been a Stalinist operative in the Mexican party. Together with the muralist Siqueiros, he tried to murder Trotsky in 1940. Siqueiros, the former communist and artist—like the Communist Party of Mexico itself—had become part of Stalin's apparatus.

It is very difficult to find out anything about Frida Kahlo's actual political involvement with communism, and what can be discovered is usually only vaguely presented. Such information is mostly derived from correspondence or private archives. Kahlo's sympathy for the Left Opposition against Stalin manifested itself in the most fulfilling and creative stage of her life, and it is impermissible to reduce this fact to a mere episode.

The exhibition catalogue explains that, during the 1930s, the New York Trotskyists of the Communist League of America often requested the presence of "comrade Frida" along with Rivera—an indication that she could have participated at political meetings. In one of Kahlo's letters from the US, she writes: "I've learnt so much here and I'm more and more convinced it's only through communism that we can become human." The former Mexican Trotskyist, Octavio Fernández, regards her as one of the founding members of the Fourth International.

Kahlo was only one of many deeply shocked by Trotsky's murder in August 1940, just a few months after the Siqueiros-led assassination attempt. Half a million people paid their grave-side respects to the founder of the Red Army and former comrade in arms of Vladimir Lenin. The famous folk song, mourning Trotsky's death and attributed to an anonymous Mexican composer, presumably also emerged from the mood of the time (mp3 audio: Gran Corrido de León Trotski).

It seems a great contradiction that Frida Kahlo rejoined the Communist Party of Mexico eight years later. But Stalin's physical annihilation of the generation of communists and the rise of Hitler had grave consequences. It damage and demoralized so many artists and intellectuals, for whom the struggle to build a new international in the working class proved overwhelming.

In certain petty bourgeois circles, especially after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, any criticism of Stalin was seen as aiding the fascists and betraying "real existing socialism." More complicated problems arose when the US and Mexico entered the war as military allies of Stalin. Moreover, the arrival of many European intellectuals and artists fleeing Hitler—who were increasingly granted political asylum in Mexico from the end of the 1930s, and many of whom were members of Stalinist parties—certainly contributed to an increasingly skeptical and pessimistic climate.

In the postwar period, a host of intellectuals convinced themselves that the victories of the Soviet army, the creation of "socialist" states in Eastern Europe, and the Chinese Revolution in 1949 made Stalin's crimes an issue of the past. Kahlo apparently gravitated with ease toward such conceptions, collecting signatures in the early 1950s for one of the innumerable Stalinist-supported "peace movements." Her evolution back toward Stalinism can be explained, but it doesn't make the reality any more attractive.

Kahlo lived in explosive times and under volatile conditions, which can only be sketched here. But even a sketch provides a clue as to the source of her capacity to depict pain, anguish and uncertainty in such a resolute manner. The occasionally shocking brutality of her art combined with an ambivalent, disturbing atmosphere that is often difficult to pinpoint precisely in her pictures. These qualities cannot be reduced merely to earlier civil war experiences, her personal problems, her complicated relationship with Rivera, and her tendency to dwell on the Mexican mentality and its supposed special relationship to death.

It is through her aesthetic confrontation with Mexican tradition, in the context of the great events of the 20th century, that Kahlo manages to transcend folkloric celebration of eternal cycles of nature and the passive dualism of peasant art. The tension in Kahlo's pictures, with their enigmatic symbols, arises from the shattering of this old dualism through the creation of a harmonic double tone. Her dualism—often depicted in the form of her relationship with Rivera; for example, in *Embracing the Universe or Diego, Me and Xolotl* (1949)—is strife-torn, occasionally destructive, and a certain mood of hostility underlies the apparent passivity. These pictures cry out for the peace and harmony that are beyond the realm of possibility.

This contrast is also to be found in Kahlo's "cult of nature". Symbols of fertility—a lushly rampant, cosmic and natural vitality—stand in contrast to the emblems of her miscarriage and her bodily suffering. Nature and the body become semaphores, as does Frida, by presenting herself interwoven with nature, or merely dressed in traditional Mexican clothing.

Perhaps Frida Kahlo's most popular portrait is *The Broken Column* (1944). When one considers the historical background of this and other paintings, it is difficult to look at them and think only of her physical illness. There was something else in her soul that was broken, something that could only be painfully held together with the aid of her art.

Concluded

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