

## Security and the Fourth International

# Sylvia Ageloff and the assassination of Leon Trotsky

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*On August 20, 1940, Leon Trotsky was assassinated by Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. Mercader's access to the great revolutionary was made possible through his relationship with Sylvia Ageloff, a member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In the aftermath of the assassination, Ageloff presented herself as an innocent victim of Mercader's duplicity, a claim that was never challenged by the SWP.*

*This series of articles constitutes the first systematic investigation by the Trotskyist movement of Ageloff's role and continues the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International's Security and the Fourth International investigation. It will be published in four parts.*

## Introduction

Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader assassinated Leon Trotsky in the late afternoon of August 20, 1940, in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. The following evening, 26 hours after the attack, the co-leader of the 1917 October Revolution died of the wound inflicted by Mercader.

The murder of Leon Trotsky is the most consequential political assassination of the 20th century. It deprived the international working class of the man who ranked alongside of Lenin as the greatest Marxist theoretician and revolutionary leader of the 20th century. Trotsky's death gravely weakened the Fourth International, in whose founding in 1938 he had played a decisive role, and undermined the development of the world socialist movement for decades to come.

Despite the lying denials of the Soviet Stalinist regime, it was immediately assumed throughout the world that the assassin was an agent of the secret police of the Soviet Union, the GPU. But for 35 years, the world knew very little about the vast scale of the conspiracy and the network of agents utilized by the Stalinist regime to prepare and carry out the assassination. The true identity of the man who went by the names "Jacques Mornard" and then "Frank Jacson" was not conclusively established until 1950. The political party principally responsible for Trotsky's security—the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the sympathizing US section of the Fourth International—not only failed to carry out any substantial investigation into the efforts by the GPU to infiltrate the Trotskyist movement on a global scale in the years preceding the attack, the SWP refused to acknowledge and directly covered up evidence of high-level GPU penetration of its own organization. Any reference to, let alone exposure of, the infiltration of GPU and FBI spies

into the Trotskyist movement was denounced by SWP leaders as "agent-baiting."

In May 1975, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) initiated an investigation into the assassination of Trotsky. Its findings, published under the title *Security and the Fourth International*, identified the international network of GPU agents involved in the assassination, including agents who remained in the SWP for decades after Trotsky's death.

Despite efforts to sabotage the work of the International Committee, the investigation into *Security and the Fourth International* continued and led to findings of extraordinary importance.

Following the decision to initiate the investigation, critical unpublished US government documents deposited in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., relating to the assassination, were discovered by Alex Mitchell, editor of the *Workers Press* (the newspaper of the British section of the ICFI). In August 1975, American Trotskyist David North, acting on behalf of the ICFI, located and photographed Mark Zborowski in San Francisco. In the 1930s, before emigrating to the United States in 1941, Zborowski had played a central role in providing information that led to the Stalinist assassination of Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, two of Trotsky's political secretaries, Erwin Wolf and Rudolf Klement, and a defector from the GPU who declared his support for the Fourth International, Ignace Reiss. The initial results of the Security and the Fourth International investigation was published in late 1975 under the title, *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*.

In December 1976, Mitchell and North travelled to Mexico City, where they interviewed individuals who were witnesses to events surrounding the assassination. The further progress of the investigation in the United States proved that SWP leader James P. Cannon's personal secretary from 1938 to 1947, Sylvia Caldwell (née Callen), was a GPU agent. The ICFI discovered documents establishing that Joseph Hansen, Trotsky's secretary in Mexico from 1937 to 1940, who was to become a key leader of the SWP until his death in 1979, had been a GPU agent and, later, an FBI informant. As might be expected given his activity as spy and government informer, it was Joseph Hansen who functioned in the SWP leadership for decades as the most determined opponent of "agent-baiting." His efforts included labeling those who sought to defend the security of the Trotskyist movement against the disruptive and murderous activities of the GPU (later known as the KGB) and FBI as "paranoid."

The initial findings of *Security and the Fourth International* were published between 1975 and 1978. Later developments—especially documents obtained through the lawsuit initiated by Alan Gelfand against government spying inside the Socialist Workers Party—fully corroborated

the most critical elements of the International Committee's investigation. Further corroboration was obtained through the release of GPU-KGB secret police documents following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

More recently, work by independent researchers who made use of the findings of *Security and the Fourth International* as well as additional documents released from state archives in Mexico has uncovered important evidence that makes possible a very detailed understanding of how the assassination of Trotsky was planned and carried out.

Analyzing this new information—combined with an examination of Sylvia Ageloff's personal background as well as her political activities while ostensibly an SWP member, and her close working relationship with Ramón Mercader—the International Committee is now able to provide a precise account of the critical role played by Ageloff in setting up the assassination of Trotsky.

The account that follows refutes the 80-year-old unchallenged narrative that Ageloff was an innocent dupe who was used by Mercader to gain access to Trotsky. This public persona was invented by Ageloff and Mercader in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. The actual facts concealed by the pathetic tale of "Poor Little Sylvia" were never seriously investigated. The narrative acquired a mythic status. But this myth has no basis in reality.

The acceptance of the myth required interpreting the most dubious and even unbelievable aspects of the Ageloff-Mercader relationship in the most innocent and non-political manner. Ageloff had to be seen as "fortune's fool"—a woman without agency, wandering blindly through life, and so monumentally stupid as to be incapable of recognizing the transparent and bizarre contradictions in the mysterious life story and activities of the man with whom she had been sleeping for nearly two years.

But once the myth is replaced with an objective review of the factual record, the young woman from Brooklyn appears in an entirely different light. From 1938 to 1940, Ageloff engaged in a pattern of willful behavior that so consistently advanced the GPU's efforts to encircle and kill Trotsky as to make any innocent explanation untenable.

At each stage in the preparation of the assassination, it was Sylvia Ageloff who played the decisive role in integrating Mercader into the Trotskyist movement, and, ultimately, into the fortified villa in Coyoacán. The conclusion reached by the present investigation is that Ageloff was a GPU agent and Ramón Mercader's accomplice in the assassination of Leon Trotsky.

In 1940, the Mexican police conducted the only contemporaneous investigation into the assassination and determined that Ageloff was an accomplice in Trotsky's murder. Mexican officials arrested and imprisoned her, charged her with murder and prosecuted her. Ageloff appears to have been saved from conviction by the diplomatic intervention of American authorities. At the time, the SWP did not provide reports on the ongoing Mexican investigation of Ageloff and kept party members in the dark. The SWP failed to question Ageloff's self-absolving account of her role in the chain of events that led to Trotsky's murder. The present investigation must therefore begin by examining the myth of "Poor Little Sylvia."

## The myth of Sylvia Ageloff

According to the conventional version of events, Sylvia Ageloff was a naïve and homely social worker from Brooklyn. Apparently desperate for affection, the young SWP member was quickly seduced by the dashing Jacques Mornard, one of the many aliases used by the assassin and the

name he used when they met. He cruelly exploited Ageloff's emotional vulnerabilities and inexperience, and eventually duped her into providing him entry to Trotsky's household.

Mercader used the opening unwittingly provided by the clueless Ageloff to carry out the attack. According to this narrative, Ageloff, in the course of an intimate affair with Mornard that lasted nearly two years, overlooked or dismissed the glaring contradictions in his cover story, which included the use of multiple names, transparent lies about his family background, mysterious business activities, and unexplained access to large amounts of money.

Like the three monkeys, but rolled into one person, Ageloff saw no evil, heard no evil and, above all, did no evil.

This story—which absolves her of any criminal responsibility for the consequences of her actions—was originally invented by Mercader himself. "Sylvia had nothing to do with this," he told police interrogators after his arrest. [1] He kept to his story until his death in Cuba in 1978. His brother, Luis Mercader, would later say of Mercader: "He never betrayed his own." [2] His lawyer, Eduardo Cenicerros, acknowledged after Mercader's death, "He never confessed anything to anyone, even though he went through the most tremendous of storms." [3]

The alibi that the assassin provided for Ageloff—even as Mercader was denying that he himself had anything to do with the Stalinist secret police—became the basis for the pathetic image of "poor little Sylvia."

Ageloff was, it has been long claimed, so shocked by Mercader's betrayal that she became hysterical and could not answer questions posed by the Mexican police or US federal agents investigating the attack. Ageloff maintained that she was a loyal SWP member who had been caught up in a drama that she was not equipped to understand. Appearing to be traumatized, Ageloff left the Trotskyist movement and never again surfaced in radical politics. Except for the Mexican government, in the immediate aftermath of the assassination, no one—and least of all the SWP—seemed particularly interested in critically examining the alibi supplied to Ageloff by the assassin.

Two major films on the crime—Joseph Losey's *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972) and Antonio Chavarrías' *The Chosen* (2016)—placed the myth at the center of their account of the murder plot. As for Ageloff, she moved on, spending the remaining 55 years of her life in affluent anonymity. Eventually residing in a comfortable Manhattan apartment, Ageloff died in 1995 at the age of 86 without leaving behind any detailed explanation of how she came to play such a critical role in a 20th century tragedy.

One irrefutable fact emerges from the careful reconstruction of the conspiracy to murder Trotsky: Remove Ageloff from the chain of events and there would have been no assassination on August 20, 1940. Without the opening provided by his relationship with Sylvia Ageloff, Mercader would not have been able to enter Trotsky's compound. In the run-up to the assassination, to have asked, "Who really is Sylvia's fiancé?" would have opened the door to a cascade of questions surrounding both Mercader and Ageloff. Even the most cursory examination of "Jacques Mornard-Frank Jacson's" bonafides—a task certainly warranted after the unsuccessful attempt on Trotsky's life by Stalinist agents on May 24, 1940—would have made him a target of suspicion, cut off his access to Trotsky and raised the question: why did Sylvia Ageloff bring him around?

This was more or less admitted by SWP leader James P. Cannon in a speech to an SWP plenum on September 28, 1940, six weeks after Trotsky's death:

There is a certain carelessness in the movement as a hangover from the past. We haven't probed deeply enough into the past of people even in leading positions—where they came from, how they

live, whom they are married to, etc. Whenever in the past such questions—elementary for a revolutionary organization—were raised, the petty-bourgeois opposition would cry, “My God, you are invading the private lives of comrades!” Yes, that is precisely what we were doing, or more correctly—threatening to do—nothing ever came of it in the past. If we had checked up on such matters a little more carefully we might have prevented some bad things in the days gone by. [4]

Cannon’s remarks, on which he did not elaborate, were an acknowledgment that the SWP had failed to investigate the people surrounding Trotsky in Coyoacán and “in leading positions” in the party.

Cannon stated it was necessary to ask more questions and “check up on things a little more carefully.” That was, to say the least, an understatement. When Cannon spoke those words, Sylvia Ageloff was detained by Mexican police on the charge of homicide. But Cannon’s actions failed to live up to his words. The SWP maintained total silence regarding Ageloff after Trotsky’s death, allowing her to retreat into anonymity. The SWP’s newspaper, *The Militant*, did not report on her arrest after the assassination, and in 1950, when Ageloff appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, it made no note of her testimony.

### **Contradictions between myth and reality: Who was Sylvia Ageloff?**

This investigation examines critical questions pertaining to Sylvia Ageloff: What was her family background? What was her political history? Did she have personal contacts with Stalinists, either through friends or family? How was she introduced to the movement, and what contributions did she make, if any, that would justify her proximity to Trotsky? What did the authorities in Mexico believe as to Ageloff’s guilt or innocence? How do the facts compare with Ageloff’s alibis?

These questions can now be answered by drawing on a factual record, which includes information related to Ageloff’s significant academic training, press reports, contemporaneous observations by those who knew Ageloff and Mercader, statements by the Ageloff family submitted during the Mexican trial of Ageloff and Mercader, publications on the assassination, FBI reports uncovered by the *Security and the Fourth International* investigation, and other valuable material.

This investigation also makes use of research that has recently been conducted in Spanish, including “Ministerial Actions in the Homicide of Leon Trotsky,” published by Mexico’s federal criminology department and authored by prominent Mexican criminologist Martin Gabriel Barrón Cruz (National Institute of Penal Sciences of Mexico, 2018). This work contains a detailed retrospective analysis of the most important criminal investigation in Mexican history, and includes a reproduction of critical legal filings in the criminal case against Ageloff and Mercader. It contains an appendix of interrogation transcripts of key witnesses, including Ageloff and Mercader themselves.

This essay also makes reference to two important Spanish language books: *The Promised Sky: A Woman at the Service of Stalin*, by Gregorio Luri (Editorial Ariel, 2016); and *Ramón Mercader: The Man of the Piolet*, by Eduard Puigventós López (Now Books, 2015).

It is possible, based on this evidentiary record, to compare the mythical Sylvia Ageloff to the real person.

The persistence of the myth of “poor little Sylvia” requires uncritical acceptance of the persona—that of a naïve, inexperienced social worker, i.e., the type of person who might have been writing letters to Miss

Lonelyhearts—that was attached to her by the Socialist Workers Party and later popularized in fictional cinematic narratives. The persistence of this myth depends on it never being questioned, because the constructed persona has nothing to do with who Ageloff really was.

The investigation necessarily begins with an examination of the Ageloff family.

### **Samuel Ageloff**

Sylvia Ageloff, born in 1909, was the daughter of Samuel Ageloff (1884–1972) and Anna Maslow (1881–1930), Russian immigrants who spoke Russian at home. Samuel was born in Lepel, Byelorussia and immigrated to the US around 1900, marrying Anna in 1902. After Anna’s death, Samuel remarried.

Samuel Ageloff became a wealthy real estate businessman in New York City. According to Roberta Satow, the author of a fictionalized account of the Ageloff sisters’ lives titled *The Two Sisters of Coyoacán*:

Until 1917 he was chiefly interested in remodeling family dwellings, but was later a pioneer in the construction of public garages. He also built dwellings in Coney Island and Bensonhurst and stores on Flatbush Avenue. Later, he built apartment houses in Williamsburg and leased office buildings for ninety-nine years and rented the offices, including an office building opposite the Academy of Music. [5]

Though Satow’s story is fictional, the background information she gathered on Samuel Ageloff is factually accurate. Her research found that Samuel Ageloff built 48 homes in Coney Island, 65 in Bensonhurst, and many stores on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. He constructed the two Ageloff Towers, located at East Third Street and Fourth Street in Manhattan, in 1929. [6]

“This was a very wealthy family,” Satow has told the *World Socialist Web Site*. [7] Beyond successful businessmen, the family included artists and psychologists. The WSWS spoke to Amy Feld, a relative of the Ageloffs and a psychologist by profession, who said the sisters were related to Franco-Russian painter Marc Chagall and internationally renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow, who developed the theory of the “hierarchy of needs.”

The Ageloffs had four daughters: Lillian (1902–1986), Hilda (1906–1997), Sylvia (1909–1995), and Ruth (1913–2009); and two sons: Allan (1903–1997) and Monte (1907–1965). Sylvia came from a highly political family, and three of the sisters entered into socialist politics in their youth.

### **Hilda Ageloff**

On September 2, 1931, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that Hilda Ageloff had traveled to the Soviet Union and interviewed Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow, who was a member of the Soviet Union’s Commission on Public Education. This trip took place two years after Trotsky had been exiled to Turkey, when his followers were being persecuted by the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. Krupskaya, who had been sympathetic to Trotsky, had long before been forced to denounce

the Left Opposition.

According to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*:

Miss Hilda Ageloff of 198 Westminster Road told today of her interview with Madam Lenin which had been the high spot of her three-and-a-half month Russian trip.

As Miss Ageloff was making a special study of the new methods of progressive education used in the kindergartens and the nurseries which care for the children in the communal farms and cities, she wished to ask Mme. Lenin many questions...

It was not easy to arrange an interview. Many correspondents from foreign newspapers had been refused ... But the difficulties smoothed out and finally one day Miss Ageloff found herself in the presence of the wife of the man Russia reveres as her savior.

Hilda Ageloff is quoted as saying: "When they were beginning this work after the revolution it would not have been possible, but Madam Lenin believes that the people have been won over to the principles of Communism."

The article concluded: "Miss Ageloff herself shares some of Madam Lenin's enthusiasm and said she intends to return to Russia to do further work with the progressive education movement."

On December 27, 1931, the *New York Times* published an article under Hilda Ageloff's byline titled "The Soviet Pushes Pre-School Work: Great Strides Reported." This story was the lead article in a Sunday series titled "The Trends and Tides of the World of Modern Education."

Her article was a pro-Stalinist account of the country's education system and a glorification of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It was the type of article that could have been written only by a Stalinist or a Stalinist fellow-traveler.

Ageloff's report specifically praised the advances that had been made by the "authorities" in the Soviet Union "since the deposition of Lunacharsky as Commissar of Public Education." Anatoly Lunacharsky was deposed from his position in 1929 in the bureaucracy's effort to sideline anyone associated with Trotsky, who had been expelled from the Soviet Union.

Hilda Ageloff's article praised the fact that "the authorities have now embarked on a steady building program in the chief industrial centers and collectivized farm regions." Uncritically advancing the Stalinist narrative, she wrote: "The authorities are fighting hard" and are accomplishing "a great and humanitarian work." In *Pravda*-esque fashion, Ageloff wrote that the success of the "next Five Year Plan" will "depend on the young Communists, the parents of the future."

While some Americans were able to travel to the Soviet Union during this period for purposes of professional and cultural exchange, setting up a meeting with Lenin's widow, among the most prominent figures in the Soviet Union, to discuss state education policy was, as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted, "not easy to arrange." Hilda Ageloff would not have been able to meet with Lenin's widow without approval being given at the highest levels of the Soviet government, that is, by Stalin himself. The Ageloff family was trusted by the Soviet authorities who made her trip possible.

On her trip to Europe, Hilda had been accompanied by her sisters, though it is not clear whether they went with her to Russia. But Gregorio Luri wrote in his biography of the Mercader family: "The three sisters returned to the United States at the end of August 1931, convinced that the future of humanity passed through the USSR." [8] At that point, Sylvia would have been 22 years old and Ruth just 18.

## Ruth Ageloff

Ruth Ageloff, Sylvia's younger sister, also lived a political life and married into another complicated political family.

According to Christopher Phelps, the author of the book *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist*, Ruth and Sylvia were prompted to join the American Workers Party (AWP), a left-wing party led by the radical preacher A.J. Muste, on the advice of James Burnham and Hook, who were teachers at New York University (NYU) when Ruth and Sylvia were students there. [9] Notably, Phelps stated in a biographical footnote that the Ageloff sisters "have refused all interviews since and declined to be interviewed for this biography." [10]

Ruth Ageloff also served as Trotsky's secretary in Mexico City beginning in 1937, when she was 23. Precisely how she obtained this position is not clear. In all likelihood, she probably volunteered her services. Given the lax security maintained by the American Trotskyists, her fluency in Russian was sufficient to enable her to be sent to Mexico. This was a method employed by the Stalinists to infiltrate agents into the small staff of the SWP. Just a year later, in 1938, Sylvia Callen, a Stalinist from Chicago, moved to New York and offered to work in the SWP's national office. Within a matter of months, she became the personal secretary of SWP leader James P. Cannon.

The *New York Times* obituary of Ruth Ageloff (married name, Poulos) published on February 4, 2009 reads:

POULOS—Ruth G. November 13, 1913-January 31, 2009. Widow of John G. Poulos, daughter of Russian immigrants Anna Maslow and Samuel Ageloff and the last of the Ageloff siblings. B.A., NYU and later M.A., Columbia, graduate of the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis. In 1936 [sic] and 37 she lived in Mexico City as secretary to Leon Trotsky and to the John Dewey Commission. In her 50s, she became a psychotherapist and maintained a practice into her 80s. [11]

Trotsky did not arrive in Mexico until January 1937. Ruth worked for Trotsky in Mexico, and, according to Sylvia, she had been recommended by James P. Cannon. The Mexican criminologist Martín Gabriel Barrón Cruz wrote that after the assassination, Mexican authorities "questioned Sylvia with respect to who had recommended Ruth to Trotsky and she confessed that it had been Cannon, 'noting that always when any person in the United States wanted to relate himself to Trotsky, it was done through the Socialist Workers Party [12] [and in this way her sister] obtained a card presenting her to Trotsky.'" [13]

Ruth's political life continued after her work in Mexico. In June 1940, after returning from Mexico City, Ruth married John Poulos (1911–1980), a trade unionist who obtained prominence during the strike movement of the 1930s and became a delegate to the Congress of Industrial Organizations' founding congress in 1938 and a member of the Socialist Workers Party National Committee. Poulos would later leave the SWP to join the Workers Party headed by Max Shachtman. He remained active in the Shachtmanite movement until his death and was a regular contributor to its publication, *Labor Action*.

Poulos's brother and close, lifelong collaborator, Constantine Poulos, was employed during World War II by the Overseas News Agency, which was funded by British intelligence and was used to provide press credentials to British intelligence assets. [14] He also had a complex political history and was apparently a Stalinist. During the Greek Civil War, Constantine Poulos was the first American journalist to become embedded with the Communist Party-run EAM-ELAS militia. After the

civil war, he served as a go-between connecting US negotiators with the Stalinist EAM-ELAS leadership. Constantine was then expelled from Greece by the monarchist government for his ties to the Communist Party. In the 1950s, John was blacklisted and removed from his role in the United Auto Workers union. [15]

John Poulos and Ruth Ageloff remained married until his death in 1980. Their son, Eric Poulos, who has previously given interviews regarding his mother and aunts, was contacted by this author but did not respond to a request for comment.

## Sylvia Ageloff

Sylvia Ageloff was 29 years old in the spring of 1938 when she decided to travel to Europe. Since her sister Hilda's trip to the Soviet Union seven years earlier, Ageloff had traveled widely, obtained an advanced degree and become deeply involved in socialist politics.

Besides English, Ageloff was fluent in at least French and Russian. She had finished high school with a specialty in drama. She would later put her acting skills to use in the aftermath of Trotsky's assassination. Ageloff continued her education after graduating from high school. In an era when it was rare for women to pursue a college education, let alone advanced degrees, she completed college with a bachelor's degree in psychology from New York University. Ageloff then went on to obtain a master's degree in child psychology from Columbia University in 1934.

An FBI report dated September 3, 1940, prepared by agent George J. Starr, provided a detailed review of Ageloff's political history, compiled through interviews with informants.

Ageloff supported the radical reverend A.J. Muste, both in the Congress for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA) and the American Workers Party (AWP), which was founded in 1933. She then joined the Workers Party (US)—the product of the December 1934 merger between the AWP and the Trotskyist Communist League of America (CLA).

The FBI report explained that Ageloff had initially joined the AWP with her sisters.

The Workers Party (US) was a broad, heterogeneous political formation formed as the Great Depression and strike wave radicalized broad sections of the working class and middle class. The merger with the AWP was aimed at providing the American Trotskyist movement with a broader milieu in which it could educate and win the radicalized layers to genuine Marxism.

The AWP was comprised of radicals and labor leaders who had risen to prominence in the Toledo Auto-Lite strike of 1934 as well as through the party's formation of unemployment councils, largely in the industrial Midwest and impoverished Appalachian regions. The AWP was amorphous in social composition and eclectic in its promotion of socialist politics. But it had opposed Stalinism and won an important following among workers and the unemployed.

The merger with the Trotskyist movement disturbed the AWP right-wing, causing AWP leaders like Louis Budenz and Harry Howe to break with the Workers Party (US) and join the Stalinist movement. The merger also upset the section of affluent progressive Christians who had financially supported Muste and the AWP as long as this chiefly entailed radical support for the unemployed. These financial supporters drifted away as Muste and his movement flirted with revolutionary politics.

Within months of its formation in 1934, the Workers Party (US) was thrown into a series of conflicts over the Trotskyists' proposal for entry into the Socialist Party (SP), which had been undergoing both a growth in membership and a radicalization of its political line. When the Trotskyist membership of the Workers Party (US) entered the SP in 1936, the

Workers Party (US) was no more.

Trotsky's assassination robbed the world working class of the greatest living representative of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Ageloff, first within the SP and then within the SWP, was apparently close to the group of New York Trotskyists around Martin Abern, a former IWW member and leader of the Communist youth movement in the 1920s. He was expelled from the Communist Party in 1928 for his support for Trotsky and became a founding member of the CLA, along with Cannon and Shachtman. While Abern had played a courageous role in the founding of the CLA, his tendency toward cliquishness made him a pole of attraction for petty-bourgeois elements, especially in the party's New York branch.

Ageloff became a member of the Socialist Workers Party at its founding in January 1938, but supported the minority opposition tendency led by Shachtman and Abern during the 1939–40 faction fight. In April 1940, she left the SWP and joined the Workers Party founded by the minority after it left the SWP.

## Ageloff's training as an expert psychologist

In her professional life, Ageloff was an expert psychologist who was trained to observe people carefully and listen to what they said. Her master's thesis, titled "A Study of 'Prestige' and 'Objective' Factors in Suggestibility in a Comparison of Racial and Sexual Differences," remains on file at Columbia University's Butler Library.

Ageloff's thesis addressed the susceptibility of people to being tricked by individuals they respect. She performed extensive research and ran tests on the theme of "suggestibility." Her research led her to conclude that individuals are psychologically susceptible to abandon common sense when pressured by people they respect. It was a curious area of expertise for a woman who would later claim that she herself was duped by Mercader.

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines "suggestibility" as "an inclination to readily and uncritically adopt the ideas, beliefs, attitudes, or actions of others." The APA defines "prestige suggestion," which was the specific focus of Ageloff's thesis, as "a message whose persuasiveness derives from its delivery by or attribution to a person of recognized status."

Ageloff's dissertation tested black and white schoolchildren to determine their susceptibility to the statements of a figure whom they respected—their teacher—even as the teacher's directives became increasingly dubious and inappropriate. Ageloff outlined her approach: "We propose here to study differences between the same racial groups, namely White and Negro, but with a series of tests" aimed at measuring "the personal influence of the experimenter." She anticipated that when a child was influenced by the respected figure, "the subject may show a tendency to form erroneous judgments" or "act in imitation or under the influence of another," as opposed to when the child merely received written suggestions or oral instructions from a stranger. [16]

Eric M. Gurevitch, a relative of the Ageloff sisters and author of the 2015 article "Thinking with Sylvia Ageloff," published in *Hypocrite Reader*, was the first person to check out Ageloff's thesis from Columbia's library. In an interview with this writer, Gurevitch said, "At times she is described as the duped idiot, sometimes she is the sexually frustrated and ugly Jewish woman, or variations on those. But these are just clichés and tropes." He added later, "Whatever one thinks happened, she was not stupid." [17]

Gurevitch explained, "The dissertation, her master's thesis, is clearly something that was produced under the guidance of really cutting edge

social psychologists. She has a real sense of this new, emerging field of social psychology.”

“Her research is about this idea of ‘who is naïve,’” Gurevitch said. “The funny part of all of this is the story is entirely about how you conform to things that other people want to impress upon you. It is curious that this is something that she is really interested in.”

Roberta Satow, the author of *Two Sisters of Coyoacán*, who is also a psychoanalyst by profession, explained, “Suggestibility is a form of seduction, if you will. And she was seduced, so it is fascinating that this was the subject of her dissertation.” [18]

The story that Ageloff was “duped” is plausible only if one accepts that she never considered the possibility she was being deceived. But, as her thesis shows, Ageloff had studied in depth the very phenomenon of which she was ostensibly a victim only a few years later.

### **Summer of 1938: Ageloff travels to Europe for founding conference of the Fourth International**

Ageloff’s trip to Europe in the summer of 1938, during which she met Mercader (who called himself “Jacques Mornard”), was a crucial experience in her life. Her voyage was not a vacation, as she would later claim. Rather, an examination of her activity in Europe establishes that Ageloff was engaged in political work related to the preparation of the founding conference of the Fourth International, which was held in September 1938. In the book *This is My Story*, Communist Party leader Louis Budenz, who in 1938 was managing the GPU’s efforts to infiltrate the SWP, referred to Ageloff as a “courier” for the Trotskyist movement.

Ageloff’s trip to Europe took place against the backdrop of Stalin’s Great Terror and a murderous campaign by the GPU to exterminate members of the Fourth International in Europe. It was hardly the time and place for a Trotskyist to take a personal vacation. The context of her trip makes her selection of a travel partner, the Stalinist Ruby Weil, all the more inexplicable.

In February of 1938, weeks before Ageloff decided to travel to Europe, the GPU network had murdered Trotsky’s son, Leon Sedov, at the Clinique Mirabeau in Paris. GPU agent Mark Zborowski, whose party name within the French Trotskyist movement was *Etienne*, provided the GPU with critical information that enabled it to carry out the assassination. Zborowski was also involved helping set up three other assassinations: that of 1) Erwin Wolf, a political secretary of Trotsky, who was murdered by the GPU after entering Spain in July 1937; 2) Ignace Reiss, who had defected from the GPU and was assassinated in Switzerland in September 1937; and 3) Rudolf Klement, the secretary of the Fourth International, who was murdered in Paris in July 1938.

In the midst of this carnage, where Trotskyists were being targeted by the Stalinists, Sylvia Ageloff traveled to Paris with someone whom she knew was an active Stalinist: the GPU agent Ruby Weil. [19]

### **What did Sylvia Ageloff know in 1938 about her travel partner, GPU agent Ruby Weil?**

Ageloff later claimed she did not know Weil was a Stalinist agent and agreed to travel with her to Europe because they were friends. This friendship became a critical aspect of the Stalinist back story to the plot to introduce Mercader/Mornard into the Trotskyist milieu. If he were ever asked how he came into contact with the movement, he could innocently

explain that his acquaintance, Ruby Weil, introduced him to her friend Sylvia.

But if Sylvia Ageloff knew Ruby Weil was in the Communist Party, why would she travel with Weil en route to prepare the secretive founding conference of the Fourth International, especially during the Stalinist Great Terror and under conditions where the GPU was killing Trotskyists in Paris and across Europe?

Tracing what Sylvia Ageloff and her sisters knew about the Weils at the time they decided to travel to Europe together requires a review of statements made after Trotsky’s assassination.

In December 1950, Sylvia and Hilda Ageloff were called to testify before Congress as to what they knew about Trotsky’s assassination and the GPU’s role in it. Both sisters testified that they did know Weil was active in the Stalinist movement: “The rumors were that she was joining the Communist Party,” Sylvia Ageloff said under oath. [20]

In her testimony, Hilda Ageloff explained that she met Ruby Weil “in the American Workers Party we belonged to in 1936 or thereabouts. [sic: the AWP merged with the Trotskyist CLA in December 1934 and ceased to exist as an independent organization.] Ruby Weil worked on the newspaper with her brother-in-law, Harry Howe. That’s how I got to know her. Afterward she left the party and stopped working on the paper. Harry Howe left the paper too, I think.” [21]

In 1940, Sylvia Ageloff told Mexican police during questioning shortly after Trotsky’s assassination that at the time she agreed to travel with Ruby Weil, she had been aware of the latter’s Stalinist affiliations. A transcript of a police interview reads: “She knew that the husband of one of [the Weil sisters], named Harry Howe, had belonged to the AWP and that he later affiliated with the Stalinists. Howe currently lives in New York but she does not know his address.” [22]

Harry Howe was not merely a rank-and-file supporter of A.J. Muste. In 1935, Howe had been the associate editor of the *New Militant*, the newspaper of the Workers Party (US), which had been formed after the unification of the Musteite AWP and the Trotskyist CLA. Howe’s name appears next to Cannon’s on the paper’s list of editors. [23] Howe had been a prominent member of the New York Labor School, run by the Congress for Progressive Labor Action, directed by Muste, and was listed as a lecturer for a 1932 course on labor journalism. [24]

Private letters show that Howe had been very hostile to the merger with the Trotskyists. A 1934 letter written by Howe to a fellow AWP member makes clear his hostility to Trotskyism: “We are moving in the direction of that sectarianism which we have so vociferously denied.” The party was “going left so fast ... I am getting pretty much fed up on this business of competing with all the other little groups for revolutionary purity.” [25]

Muste’s biographer Leilah Danielson said Howe was among “the most important national leaders” of the AWP. After the merger with the CLA, Howe followed Budenz’s lead and resigned from the Workers Party (US) in 1935. [26]

Howe’s wife was Ruby Weil’s sister, Marion Weil. Later, in a September 25, 1940 communication from the Mexican consulate to the US State Department, it was revealed that Joseph Hansen had told the US government that Sylvia Ageloff knew when she decided to travel with Ruby Weil that her sister Marion was also a Stalinist and that a third Weil sister, Gertrude, may have also been involved in arranging the meeting between Ageloff and Mercader. The communication, released through the *Security and the Fourth International* investigation, reads:

Mr. Hansen intimated that valuable information might be obtained in following manner: the Department will recall the previous mention in despatches [sic] from this office of a Ruby Weil. She, according to Hansen, is one of three sisters, the other two being named Gertrude and Marian. [27] The former is married

to a Rabbi and living in Albuquerque, New Mexico; has never been engaged in politics of any kind, although she was the one Marian mentioned in a letter addressed to Sylvia Ageloff, in Paris, in 1938, as being interested that Sylvia should meet Jacson. Hansen's explanation of the use of Gertrude's name in this connection is that Marian has long been a rabid and devout Stalinist, and that should she show herself as the party interested in a meeting between Jacson and Sylvia, Sylvia might have have [sic] reason to suspect her motives. The Department may be able to learn from Gertrude some information of value. Hansen said that the above information was told by Sylvia to her brother, Monte.

Hilda Ageloff later testified that the Ageloff sisters had known Marion Weil at the time Sylvia Ageloff traveled with Ruby Weil: "I once phoned Marion, her [Ruby's] sister, and asked how she was, and she said she was getting along all right." [28]

### July 1938: Ageloff and "Jacques Mornard" meet in Paris

At the beginning of July in Paris, according to the unchallenged version of the story, Weil introduced Ageloff to "Jacques Mornard." He treated Ageloff lavishly and induced her to fall in love with him. Mornard said he was a sports journalist, writing for newspapers like *La Nation Belge*, *Le Soir*, *Les Dernieres Nouvelles*, *Auto* and *Les Sports*. [29] He had plenty of money to spend, he said, because he was the child of a Belgian diplomat who died in 1926.

In a declaration taken by Mexican police after the attack, Ageloff explained that she had never seen him work or read his published articles. She "accepted as true what Jacson told her," using the name "Jacson," which he used upon his arrival in North America in 1939. He "always had plenty of money and frequented the best places," Ageloff continued. [30]

The first obvious question is why Ageloff, a highly educated intellectual and supposedly a committed revolutionary socialist entrusted with high-level responsibilities in the Trotskyist movement, would plunge unthinkingly into a relationship with a rich playboy whose family—if Mornard was to be believed—had close connections with the reactionary Belgian state?

In any event, it was glaringly obvious, from the earliest stages of Ageloff's relationship with Mornard, that her new lover was a very dubious individual. The circumstances of their initial encounter were improbable and there were glaring contradictions in his personal narrative. And given the political context—the Moscow Trials and Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union and the GPU assassinations of Trotskyists in Spain (Erwin Wolf), Switzerland (Ignace Reiss) and France (Leon Sedov and Rudolf Klement)—it is impossible to believe that Ageloff never considered the possibility that Mornard was a Stalinist agent.

*To be continued*

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Notes:

[1] Martín Gabriel Barrón Cruz, "Actuaciones Ministeriales en el Homicidio de León Trotsky," Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Penales, Mexico D.F., 2018, p. 39.

[2] Excerpted from *Asaltar los Cielos*, (*Storm the Skies*), 1996 documentary film directed by Javier Rioyo and José Luis López Linares.

[3] Ibid.

[4] James P. Cannon, *The Socialist Party in World War II: Writings and Speeches, 1940 – 43* (Pathfinder Press, 1975), pp. 81–82.

[5] See Satow's website, available at:

<https://www.twosistersofCoyoacán.com/about>

[6] Aisha Carter, "Sunny East Village Pad in Ageloff Towers Is the Perfect Starter Apartment," *6 Sq Ft*, April 16, 2015.

[7] Interview with Roberta Satow by Eric London, August 18, 2020.

[8] Gregorio Luri, *El Cielo Prometido: Una Mujer al Servicio de Stalin* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 2016), p. 214.

[9] The Trotskyist movement in the US would merge with the AWP in 1934.

[10] Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 111 n. 32. First published by Cornell University Press in 1997. Phelps indicates that he conducted his research when all three sisters were alive.

[11] Available here.

[12] The Trotskyist movement in the US formed the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in January 1938.

[13] Barrón Cruz, pp. 54–55.

[14] P.J. Grisar, "Sharks Defending Britain from Nazis? How 'Fake News' Helped Foil Hitler," *Forward*, October 22, 2018. ("the publication provided press credentials to British spies.")

[15] Dan Georgakas, "The Greeks in America," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, NY, Spring-Summer 1987, Vol. 14 Nos. 1 and 2, pp. 29–31.

[16] Sylvia Ageloff, "A Study of 'Prestige' and 'Objective' Factors in Suggestibility In A Comparison of Racial and Sex Differences," May 1934, available at Butler Library, Columbia University.

[17] Interview with Eric M. Gurevitch by Eric London, August 17, 2020.

[18] Interview with Roberta Satow by Eric London, August 18, 2020.

[19] The \$200 cost of a standard stateroom berth on a transatlantic ocean liner was also prohibitively expensive for most people in 1938. For archived brochures showing prices from 1938, see here). In 2020 dollars, a standard ticket would cost roughly \$3,700 today.

[20] American Aspects of the Assassination of Leon Trotsky, US House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities, 1950, p. 3,402.

[21] Ibid., p. 3,407.

[22] Barrón Cruz, p. 163.

[23] See for example, here.

[24] See for example, *Labor Age* of November, 1932, p. 2.

[25] Leilah Danielson, "Howe to Hardman, June 21, 1934," *American Gandhi: AJ Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2014), p. 188.

[26] Ibid., p. 404 n. 57.

[27] Most references spell Ruby Weil's sister's name as "Marion," not "Marian."

[28] American Aspects of the Assassination of Leon Trotsky, p. 3,409.

[29] Eduard Puigventós López, *Ramón Mercader, el Hombre del Piolet: Biografía del asesino de Trotsky* (Barcelona: Now Books, 2015), e-book at location 2,424.

[30] Ibid. at location 2,415.



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