

Jose Ma. Sison, founder of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, dies aged 83

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Jose Ma. Sison, founder and lifelong leader of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), died on December 16 at the age of 83. No figure in the past half-century was more instrumental in the betrayal of the Filipino working class and oppressed masses than Sison.

Since its founding 54 years ago by Sison, the CPP has been waging an armed struggle in the Philippine countryside through the New Peoples Army (NPA). On December 17, the party announced 10 days of official mourning for the passing of its leader.

Various public figures associated with the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) issued statements on Sison's death that mixed elements of unhinged tirade and vulgar celebration. The NTF-ELCAC is an official government council, headed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, responsible for coordinating military, intelligence and police efforts to persecute and scapegoat those accused of being communists. "Rest in piss," Lorraine Badoy, spokesperson of the NTF-ELCAC, wrote crudely.

The news reports produced by the mainstream media and statements released by leading ruling class politicians had a starkly different tone. GMA News, flagship of the country's second largest media conglomerate, released an image honoring Sison, with the caption, "You will be remembered."

Fascistic former President Rodrigo Duterte issued a statement. "While Mr. Sison and I have had many disagreements," he said, "I would like to believe that, at the end of the day, we shared the same dream of creating a better future for every Filipino... My sincerest condolences to his family."

It is clear that many in the ruling elite in the Philippines are aware that with Sison's death they have lost an immensely useful ally.

Origins

Jose Ma. Sison, known as Joma Sison, was born in 1939 to an extremely wealthy family; it had been the largest landholder in northern Luzon at the turn of the century. Sison was part of a pervasive network of familial connections that stretched from the National Legislature to the Manila Cathedral: two of his uncles were congressmen; another was the archbishop of Nueva Segovia, which encompassed all of the province of Ilocos Sur; and his great-uncle was the province's governor.

At Sunday Mass, the front pews were reserved for Sison's family. The peasant tenants of their estate came each day to his home to "deliver land rent, ask for seeds, do menial tasks around the house or plead for some special consideration." Servants waited on the young Sison, dressing him and handing him his towel in the bathroom.^[1]

Sison attended elite religious high schools in Manila, where he was instructed by Jesuits and Dominicans. The crops raised on his family's holdings gradually lost value on the world market and by the time that Sison reached university the once wealthy family had been reduced to the ranks of the upper-middle class. By 1960, Sison was a graduate student in the English department at the University of the Philippines, with a scholarship from the International Cooperation Agency (ICA), the predecessor to USAID.

Sison became the foremost representative of a social layer that found its interests articulated by Senator Claro M. Recto. A leading collaborator during the Japanese Occupation, Recto by the late 1950s advocated a program of economic nationalism in support of Filipino capitalists.

In a speech delivered in 1957, Recto called for "industrialization of the country by Filipino capitalists, and not simply the prevention of industrialization by foreign capitalists; exploitation of our natural resources by Filipino capital; development and strengthening of Filipino capitalism, not foreign capitalism; increase of the national income, but not allowing it to go mostly for the benefit of non-Filipinos."^[2] This perspective became Sison's lifelong concern.

In 1960, Sison founded a campus organization, the Student Cultural Association of the University of the Philippines (SCAUP), dedicated to promoting Recto's ideas. They were convinced that Recto's measures in support of Filipino capitalists needed mass support in order to be implemented. This required whipping up enthusiasm among workers and peasants for a set of bosses on the basis of their nationality. Here the program of Stalinism was critical.

Stalinism used nationalism, dressed up in the language of Marxism and revolution, to instruct workers and peasants to form an alliance with a section of capitalists. In accord with the retrograde theory of socialism in a single country, the justification and economic basis of their privileges, the Stalinist bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing sought to secure trade and diplomatic ties with various capitalist powers by leveraging the political weight of the Communist Parties in each country.

These Communist parties were based on the old Menshevik idea of a two-stage revolution, which had been decisively invalidated by the October 1917 revolution, to argue that the tasks confronting workers in countries of belated capitalist development were exclusively national and democratic in character and not yet socialist. A section of the capitalist class would play a progressive role, they argued, in this first revolutionary stage and workers should form an alliance with them and give them critical support.

The program of Stalinism and Socialism in One Country stands in historical opposition to that of Trotskyism and Permanent Revolution. The battle between these perspectives became the defining struggle of Marxism and a river of blood separates them. Where Stalinism formed

opportunistic alliances with the capitalist class on nationalist grounds, Trotskyism fought for the political independence of the working class in the international fight for socialism—the basis for the establishment of the world’s first workers’ state in Russia in 1917. Stalinism’s insistence on the exclusively national and democratic character of the first stage of the revolution blocks the organically developing struggles of the working class and opens the door for counterrevolution.

Sison, oriented to the development of Filipino capitalism, saw in this constraint on the working class the great usefulness of Stalinism: the language and program of Stalinism provided Sison the ideological means of bringing the support of the Filipino working class behind the interests of the capitalist class. It is this class orientation to the national bourgeoisie that explains Sison’s deep-seated and visceral hostility to Trotskyism.

Maoism is the Chinese variant of Stalinism. It used the radical-sounding slogans of the Little Red Book and armed struggle in the countryside as a means of securing a hold over social unrest and using it to negotiate ties with a section of the bourgeoisie. By 1967 Sison adopted the perspective of Maoism and sought to achieve Rectonian nationalism via the barrel of a gun. His orientation to the development of national capitalism remained unaltered throughout his career. As Sison declared in a speech delivered to a mass demonstration of workers and youth in January 1965: “We are siding with Filipino capitalists.”

A Lifetime of Betrayals

Sison learned the program of Stalinism in Indonesia. He traveled to Jakarta in late 1961 where he met with D.N. Aidit and other leaders of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), a mass Stalinist party then closely tied to the administration of President Sukarno. On his return to the Philippines in 1962, Sison was made a member of the Executive Committee of the Stalinist Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP). It was the beginning of his 60-year career of lies, assassinations, slander and class betrayal.

The Lapiang Manggagawa (Workers Party, LM) was formed in January 1963 as an independent political party representing hundreds of thousands of unionized workers. Looking to get Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal to adopt closer ties with Sukarno, Sison arranged to merge the LM with Macapagal’s ruling Liberal Party. Macapagal used the support arranged by Sison to crack down on an explosive strike of Manila’s port workers. Macapagal’s troops shot and bayoneted the striking workers, while Sison wrote editorials in support of Macapagal, claiming he was carrying out the “unfinished revolution.”^[3]

The PKP shifted its support from Macapagal to Ferdinand Marcos in the presidential election of 1965. Sison led the newly-founded youth organization of the PKP, the Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youth, KM), to support Marcos. He delivered a report to the national committee of the KM on August 19, in which he declared that Marcos’ Nacionalista Party (NP) was progressive because “within its ranks there are those who would rather defend the interests of national entrepreneurs.”^[4] Sison was instrumental in securing the first presidential election victory of the future dictator Ferdinand Marcos, whom he presented as a progressive figure.

In 1967 the PKP split in two. Sison led a small portion of PKP youth to found a new party in 1968 on the Maoist perspective in Beijing—the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The radical rhetoric of the CPP gave it great influence over the social unrest of the early 1970s. Sison used this influence to divert the protests behind the ruling class allies of the CPP, particularly Ninoy Aquino.

The forces backed by Sison, the ruling class opponents of Marcos, were not democratic figures. They sought to impose military dictatorship as did Marcos, but they needed to use the growing unrest to oust Marcos before

they imposed martial law. Aquino secretly met with US Embassy officers in September 1972 and told them that he intended to attempt to take power in a coup with support from both a section of the military and the CPP. He assured the US that he would impose martial law and execute dissidents.

The PKP continued to back Marcos and staged bombings throughout Manila that Marcos used to justify military dictatorship. When martial law was imposed in September 1972, the PKP held a congress to endorse the Marcos regime and by 1974 took up positions in the Marcos cabinet. Sison, meanwhile, led the CPP to channel all opposition to the danger of martial law behind the coup-plotting sections of the elite enemies of Marcos. The rival Stalinist parties worked to ensure that no independent opposition to dictatorship emerged in the working class; they channeled every bit of dissent behind one or another rival faction of the capitalist class.^[5]

More than any other figure, it was Sison who ensured that the explosion of struggle in the Filipino working class and youth was subordinated to the interests of the sugar barons and elite coup plotters. The Stalinist program of Sison made martial law possible.

Philippine Society and Revolution

It was in the period immediately before Marcos’ imposition of martial law that Sison wrote what was to become his defining political work, *Philippine Society and Revolution*.^[6] Written under the pseudonym Amado Guerrero, serialized as newspaper articles in 1970 and published as a book in 1971, *Philippine Society and Revolution* provided the ideological justifications for the Maoist strategy of protracted people’s war. It remains the core text of the CPP to this day.

PSR, as it became known, was written as a polemic against the leadership of the Moscow-aligned PKP and attempted to give historical and theoretical weight to Sison’s core political conception: that a modified form of Rectonian nationalism could only be achieved through armed struggle in the countryside.

Sison argued that the Philippines was a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country and that the victorious revolution would establish a joint government of workers and capitalists that would carry out national democratic measures, specifically land reform and national industrialization. Recto’s ends remained unchanged, but the means were now more drastic.

PSR is, to its core, a nationalist document. This is why Sison inscribed the book to “every patriot in the land,” and not to the international working class. At no point does PSR present itself as a development in the history of Marxism; there is not a single line dedicated to the political or theoretical continuity of Marxist thought.

The nationalism of PSR is particularly palpable in the text’s silences. The longer one lingers over what is absent, the stronger one’s sense of its parochialism grows, a feeling that PSR was unwilling to gaze beyond the Philippine archipelago.

PSR, a text dedicated to revolution, makes no mention of the 1789 French Revolution, nor does it include a word on 1848 and the revolutions that rocked Europe. What was their class character? What lessons should be derived for future struggles?

The silence grows. Stunningly absent is the Russian Revolution of 1917. Neither February nor October merited even a passing mention. PSR contains not a word on the seizure of power by the Russian working class and the role of the Bolshevik Party. The CPP, a party with Communist in its name, had nothing to say about the central event of the twentieth century, the event without which the party would not exist. The *Communist Manifesto* is absent; so too is *Capital*. Marx himself is absent,

except as a header in the phrase “Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought.”

The history of Marxism was not the only glaring lacuna. The year was 1970, yet the critical problems and revolutionary struggles gripping the globe were similarly treated as irrelevant. The PKI was slaughtered in 1965–66, but this merited no mention. Suharto, now ruling as dictator in Indonesia, is absent. An analysis of his rise is critical to understanding the trajectory of Marcos, but PSR has nothing to say on this point.

Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh, the Viet Cong—the Vietnam War was the foremost political crisis in the world—but PSR is silent. While the text heralds “Mao Zedong Thought,” it makes no examination of the crises gripping the Chinese Communist Party. The Cuban revolution is mentioned once, but here the parochialism of PSR is even more striking, for it is mentioned only for the impact it had on Philippine sugar production. Its class character, its outcome, the attitude Filipino workers should take toward it? PSR is silent.

These silences do not express a want of space but rather a lack of interest. When it first appeared as a book, PSR was nearly three hundred pages long and it dedicated paragraphs to what “racial stocks” made up the “Filipino people,” but none to the history or theoretical heritage of Marxism and none to the broader world.

PSR dedicated a majority of its pages to demonstrating that the economy of the Philippines remained semi-feudal and semi-colonial. Sison argued that US imperialism exported capital to the Philippines to secure raw material production. This was done, he admitted, through capitalist farming. The workers employed on capitalist farms, however, relied on other farms to produce the food that they consumed. The farms producing the food for these workers were themselves worked by peasants and tenants. This peasant agriculture was in fact directly tied to global capitalism and was itself engaged in the production of cash crops for the domestic market; this was capitalist production.

Sison, however, claimed that the profits of US imperialism, extracted through capitalist agriculture, were dependent on the “feudal” production of basic staples. “Domestic feudalism,” he argued, “is the social base of US imperialism.”^[7] Sison claimed that the entire immense weight of imperialism, described by Lenin as the highest stage of capitalism, stood upon the narrow base of peasant agriculture. This claim was the core conception of PSR, the justification for the protracted people’s war of the NPA. By attacking the most backward forms of agriculture in the remotest parts of the Philippines, Sison claimed, the CPP was attacking the foundation of US empire.

Rooted in nationalism, Sison dismissed the decisive significance of the global nature of capitalism. It is not “domestic feudalism” but world capitalism that perpetuates the export-driven agrarian character of portions of the Philippine economy. The backwardness of the Philippine economy is a product not of “semi-feudalism” but of capitalism.

For Sison, industrialization would be genuine only if it was an autonomous development, independent of the global market. Intermediate production bound up with the import and export of goods, even if it was heavily mechanized, was not industrialization. He envisioned an autonomous national capitalism developing in the Philippines in which Philippine raw materials were processed in Philippine industries for Philippine consumption. His political correlate to the Stalinist conception of “socialism in one country” was the idea of building “capitalism in one country.”

Capitalism, however, is a global system and does not permit an isolated and autonomous development artificially secured within the confines of the nation-state. But this is precisely the scheme that Sison promoted. The class interests behind such a scheme are obvious. They express the interests of a section of the Filipino bourgeoisie who were looking for the government to implement limited protectionist measures and provide subsidies in support of their developing industrial concerns. Sison openly

articulated their interests. He bemoaned the fact that because of US imperialism, “not even the national bourgeoisie can hope to increase its share in the exploitation of the Filipino people. This social stratum is daily facing bankruptcy.”^[8]

All of this served to justify Sison’s political line of using armed struggle to secure an alliance with a section of the bourgeoisie. He insisted that the revolution for which the party fought was “not yet a proletarian socialist revolution. Only the muddle-headed will confuse the national democratic stage and the socialist stage of the Philippine revolution. Only after the people’s democratic revolution has been completely won can the proletarian revolutionary leadership carry out the socialist revolution as the transitional stage towards communism.”^[9] The goal of the revolution, Sison wrote, was to build “the united front dictatorship of the proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, national bourgeoisie and all other patriots.”^[10]

Sison’s premises are fundamentally false and his political conclusions stand in opposition to the entire history of Marxism. Trotsky demonstrated in his theory of Permanent Revolution that world capitalism—with its global market, system of production and division of labor—is ripe for socialism. Individual nation-states, whether economically advanced or semi-colonial, are subordinate components of this global whole. The bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development like the Philippines are organically incapable of meeting the democratic and social aspirations of the masses, which means that the working class, rallying the peasantry, is the only social force capable of carrying out these progressive tasks. However, in completing the democratic tasks, workers will be compelled to implement socialist measures. The fate of the revolution will be decided on the world stage in the struggle for international socialism. The struggle to carry out and expand this revolution must be based on the bedrock principle of the independence of the working class from every faction of the bourgeoisie and their political representatives. It was this perspective that served as the guiding program of the October 1917 revolution.

For all Sison’s talk about the “leadership of the proletariat,” what he called for was a revolution for capitalism, not socialism; a revolution waged in the countryside, which workers could lead only if they left the cities and factories and ceased to be part of the working class; and which would form a government that bound workers to the capitalist class, whose fundamental class interest is the increased exploitation of the proletariat. This was not the leadership of the working class. It was the betrayal and suppression of the interests of workers.

Exile and Split

Sison founded the CPP on the conception that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the leading revolutionary force in the world and that China would serve as the base for the expansion of armed revolution throughout Asia and beyond. The nationalism of China and the Soviet Union brought the two Stalinist powers into open, and even armed, conflict. Mao, seeking to secure an advantage against Brezhnev, opened relations Washington, meeting with Nixon and Kissinger in 1971-2.

In furthering this end, Mao shifted China’s political line from support for armed uprisings in the countryside to the embrace of the dictatorial allies of the United States. When Pinochet took power in Chile in 1973, crushing the Chilean Communist Party which had backed Salvador Allende, the CCP immediately established friendly relations with Pinochet. In the same manner, Mao met with Imelda Marcos in 1974 and with Ferdinand Marcos in 1975, severed all ties with Sison and the CPP, and established friendly relations with the Marcos dictatorship. Sison

heralded Mao's actions as "a diplomatic victory of the Peoples Republic of China, [and] a victory of the Philippine revolutionary struggle."^[11] The CPP responded to its geopolitical isolation by doubling down on its nationalism.

Sison was captured in 1977 by the Marcos regime, imprisoned and tortured by the military. He was released from prison by the Corazon Aquino administration which came to power with the ouster of Marcos by the People Power revolution of February 1986, a mass protest movement that combined with the withdrawal of support for the regime by a section of the military.^[12] It was a socially explosive moment. Strikes erupted in workplaces throughout the Philippines. Aquino, who was the owner of the largest sugar plantation in the country, did not yet have a secure hold on power. Sison immediately moved to support the new government, bringing with him the support of the working class.

The culmination of these efforts came on May 1, 1986, when Sison stood on stage at Luneta Plaza alongside President Aquino and the head of the military, Gen. Fidel Ramos—who had been a leading figure in the Marcos dictatorship—in front of a mass audience of workers while the military band played the Internationale. In February 1987, the military forces of Aquino opened fire on unarmed peasant marchers, killing over a dozen. The demonstrators had been led by the forces of the CPP, bearing placards that read "Cory [Aquino], our hero," to ask the Aquino government for land reform.^[13] The revolutionary crisis of 1986 averted, the Aquino government turned ever more openly to the military for support, purged her cabinet of left-wing figures, and cracked down on the CPP and all forms of political dissent.

Sison was traveling abroad, seeking to secure ties with, and material aid from, the Gorbachev regime. He announced that the CPP's former attacks against "Soviet social-imperialism and revisionism" on the basis of the political line of Mao had been a mistake.^[14] With the shift of the Aquino government, Sison was unable to safely return to the Philippines, and he took up exile in the Netherlands, where he lived for the rest of his life. From his home in Utrecht, he attempted to regain control over the party he had founded, which was caught up in the crisis of world Stalinism as the Moscow bureaucracy moved to dissolve the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Beijing bureaucracy moved to open the Chinese economy to global capitalism.

Writing under the pseudonym Armando Liwanag, Sison denounced his rivals in the party as supporters of the "revisionist" and "anti-communist traitor" Gorbachev, the very figure he had been seeking to ally with but two years prior. The CPP fragmented into multiple parties and tendencies, and one of the fragments, headed by Sison, kept the name. All of the breakaway groups retained the nationalist and class collaborationist politics of Stalinism, as they sought to ally with rival factions of the ruling class.^[15]

The list of betrayals and crimes carried out by Sison over the subsequent decades is long. He was guilty of ordering the assassination of political rivals, falsifying the past, and heralding the most reactionary figures in Philippine history as progressive. He was instrumental in setting in motion witch-hunts and purges within the CPP that led to the execution of over one thousand cadre in the late 1980s.

Support for Duterte

Among the starkest examples of Sison's betrayals came at the end of his life, the culmination of his lifelong Stalinist legacy: Sison enthusiastically endorsed the fascistic presidency of Rodrigo Duterte.^[16] Sison routinely built relations with fascistic leaders and local warlords, bringing them the support of the working class and peasantry. Among these was Duterte,

mayor of the southern city of Davao.

Sison had long cultivated ties between Duterte and the CPP, and the NPA played a prominent role in Duterte's creation of his death squads in Davao. On the basis of these ties, Sison openly supported Duterte's presidency. At Duterte's request, Sison selected three people to serve in Duterte's cabinet.

Sison covered up Duterte's repeated public threats of mass murder, treating them as "jokes." When Duterte became president and launched his murderous drug war, which began killing hundreds and then thousands of poor Filipinos, Sison told CNN that the NPA was committed to helping Duterte carry out his war on drugs. When the CPP's ties with Duterte finally soured, Sison flagrantly lied and claimed the party had never supported him.

Duterte launched red-tagging allegations that led to the murder of scores of activists, creating the NTF-ELCAC to oversee the crackdown. Lorraine Badoy, who rose to prominence as undersecretary to one of the members of Duterte's cabinet selected by Sison, was made spokesperson of the anti-Communist task force.

Sison responded to Duterte's crackdown by telling young people in an online meeting in early 2021 that the "best thing that could happen for the revolution would be for Duterte to impose a fascist dictatorship."^[17] As he had done with Marcos' imposition of martial law in 1972, Sison welcomed the suppression of the working class.

The CPP, founded in the heyday of the Maoism of the Little Red Book and Cultural Revolution, deliberately pursued a policy of the cult of the great leader, and built itself around Sison whom it surrounded with a reputation of infallibility and unquestioned political power. His death leaves the party in crisis.

The remaining leadership of the party is largely geriatric and does not have the cultivated popularity of Sison. It is likely, in the near future, that the entire political architecture that he dedicated his life to creating will collapse. Individual NPA units may increasingly turn to hiring themselves out as local armed muscle. The legal electoral groupings tied to the political line of the CPP may fragment and turn to ever more openly capitalist politics.

Much of the CPP's credibility among broad masses of the Philippine population was shattered with the exposure of its support for the fascistic Duterte. The *World Socialist Web Site* played a decisive role in this. In August 2019, I delivered a widely attended public lecture documenting the depth and extent of the CPP's backing of Duterte. Sison responded with a series of unhinged attacks against me and the entire history of Trotskyism. The WSWS mounted a campaign in defense of historical truth against Sison's falsifications.

Sison dredged up, unchanged, all of the Stalinist lies that date back to the show trials of the 1930s. He dedicated an entire issue of *Ang Bayan*, the flagship journal of the CPP, to these recycled slanders and threats. He circulated doctored images and accused me of being an agent of the CIA. His online minions issued hundreds of death threats. He claimed that Trotsky was an agent of Hitler and that Chinese Trotskyists were agents of Japanese militarism. Sison declared that Stalin was correct in carrying out his murderous crusade against the old Bolsheviks and the Fourth International.

The WSWS published dozens of articles refuting Sison's lies, documenting the opportunist history of the CPP, and securing immense support from workers, young people and academics around the world. The campaign exposed before the eyes of the Philippine and international working class that beneath the radical-sounding rhetoric of the CPP was a program dedicated to the preservation of capitalism and the betrayal of the working class.

To take stock of the life of Joma Sison is to document the bloody history of betrayed workers' struggles in the Philippines. His was a life entirely caught up in lies. Sison will come to be remembered by the working class

as a Stalinist servant of their enemy, the capitalist class.

Workers and young people in the Philippines, looking for a revolutionary alternative to the decades of Stalinist betrayal under the leadership of Sison, will find a way forward only by breaking with all forms of nationalism and class collaboration. This requires the careful study of Trotsky's program of Permanent Revolution and the history of the world Trotskyist movement.

I examine Sison's background and early development as a Stalinist in detail in "'We Are Siding with Filipino Capitalists': Nationalism and the Political Maturation of Jose Ma. Sison," *Sojourn* (2021) 36 no. 1, 1-39 (JSTOR)

Claro M. Recto, *Complete Works*, vol. 9 (Pasay: Claro M. Recto Foundation, 1990), 148.

I detail the strike and Sison's support for Macapagal in "A Deliberately Forgotten Battle: The Lapiang Manggagawa and the Manila Port Strike of 1963," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2022) 53, no. 1-2, 226-251, doi:10.1017/S0022463422000376. I examine Sison's role in shaping Macapagal's ties with Sukarno in "A Region in Dispute: Racialized Anti-Communism and Manila's Role in the Origins of Konfrontasi, 1961-63," *Modern Asian Studies* (2022), 1-23, doi:10.1017/S0026749X22000397.

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Sison [Amado Guerrero, pseudonym], *Philippine Society and Revolution* [PSR] (Hong Kong: Ta Kung Pao, 1971).

PSR, 115.

PSR, 147.

PSR, 234.

PSR, 288.

Ang Bayan, October 20 1974.

On the ouster of Marcos and the nature of the Aquino administration, see "Thirty-five years since the 'People Power' ouster of Marcos in the Philippines" (WSWS).

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I document this statement, and examine its historical roots in Sison's Stalinism, in a lecture delivered at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, UC Berkeley, in 2021, "Three Grenades in August: Fifty years since the bombing of Plaza Miranda."

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