

Esteban Volkov, grandson of Leon Trotsky, has died

Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International
17 June 2023

The International Committee of the Fourth International is deeply saddened by the passing on the evening of June 16 of Esteban Volkov, the grandson of Leon Trotsky. He was 97 years old. Volkov died in Mexico City, where he had lived since arriving in Mexico in 1939.

Though not personally active in revolutionary socialist politics, Esteban Volkov remained profoundly loyal during his long life to the principles and memory of his grandfather and all the members of his martyred family.

Born in the Soviet Union on March 7, 1926, Vsevolod (his Russian name) was the son of Trotsky's daughter, Zinaida, and her husband, Platon Volkov, a leading member of the Trotskyist Left Opposition. The young child's father was arrested and murdered by the Stalinist regime. Zinaida was allowed to leave the Soviet Union with Vsevolod, her youngest child (known as "Seva"), to visit Trotsky in Prinkipo, an island off the coast of Istanbul where he was living in exile.

Suffering from tuberculosis and depression, Zinaida traveled in late 1931 to Germany for medical treatment. She traveled alone, with the expectation that she would soon be reunited with Seva. But on February 20, 1932, the Stalinist regime revoked the Soviet citizenship of Trotsky. The inclusion of all members of Trotsky's immediate family, including Zinaida and Seva, in this bureaucratic decree was described by Trotsky as "a wretched and stupid act of vengeance against me." This act of calculated vindictiveness made Zinaida's personal circumstances in Germany more difficult.

Without citizenship, it required months to arrange for Seva's reunion with his mother. But by the time of his arrival in Berlin, Zinaida's mental and physical health had severely deteriorated. On January 5, 1933, Zinaida

Volkova committed suicide. In a letter addressed to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, dated January 11, 1933, Trotsky recounted the circumstances of his daughter's death.

Seva, he wrote, "was hardly near his mother for a week when General Schleicher's police in collusion with the Stalinist agents decided to expel my daughter from Berlin. Where? To Turkey? To the Island of Prinkipo? But the child had to attend school. My daughter needed continuous medical attention and normal conditions of work and family life. The new blow was more than this sick person could bear. On January 5, she asphyxiated herself with gas. She was thirty years old."

The accession of Hitler to power less than one month later compelled Lev Sedov, Trotsky's eldest son, to flee Germany with his six-year-old nephew. In 1935 Seva arrived with his uncle in Paris, where Sedov directed the work of the Fourth International in Europe. In February 1938, Sedov was murdered by the Soviet secret police (the GPU), which was acting on information provided by Mark Zborowski, its key agent in the Paris headquarters of the Fourth International.

Following a protracted struggle over custody of the child, Seva arrived in Mexico in August 1939 and was reunited with Trotsky and his step-grandmother, Natalia Sedova.

In the early morning hours of May 24, 1940, an attempt on Trotsky's life was made by a gang of Stalinists, led by the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros. The doors of the Coyoacán villa where Trotsky lived and worked were opened by Robert Sheldon Harte, a Stalinist agent who had infiltrated the Socialist Workers Party. Once inside the compound, the assassination squad directed machine gunfire into Trotsky's bedroom and that of his grandson. In his account of the assault,

titled “Stalin Seeks My Death,” Trotsky wrote:

As the shooting died down we heard our grandson in the neighboring room cry out: “Grandfather!” The voice of the child in the darkness under the gunfire remains the most tragic recollection of that night. The boy—after the first shot had cut his bed diagonally as evidenced by marks left on the door and wall—threw himself under the bed. One of the assailants, apparently in a panic, fired into the bed, the bullet passed through the mattress, struck our grandson in the big toe and imbedded itself in the floor. The assailants threw two incendiary bombs and left our grandson’s bedroom. Crying, “Grandfather!” he ran after them into the patio, leaving a trail of blood behind him and, under gunfire, rushed into the room of one of the guards.

At the outcry of our grandson, my wife made her way into his already empty room. Inside, the floor, the door and a small cabinet were burning. “They have kidnapped Seva,” I said to her. This was the most painful moment of all. Shots continued to ring out but already away from our bedroom somewhere in the patio or immediately outside the walls. The terrorists were apparently covering their retreat. My wife hastened to smother the incendiary flames with a rug. For a week afterward she had to treat her burns.

Trotsky and Natalia miraculously survived the assault, and 14-year-old Seva had not been kidnapped. But three months later, the next attempt on Trotsky’s life achieved its criminal objective. With the critical assistance of Sylvia Ageloff, another Stalinist agent working inside the Fourth International, the GPU assassin Ramon Mercader was allowed access to the Coyoacán villa and to Trotsky. On August 20, 1940, Mercader carried out his attack after being admitted into Trotsky’s office.

Esteban Volkov was not in the villa when the attack was carried out. But he arrived at what was his home in its immediate aftermath. In an interview conducted in

2003, Volkov recalled the events of that terrible late afternoon:

I had no idea what was happening, When I went into the study, I saw Lev Davidovich wounded, lying on the ground, but the guards and others stopped me from going any closer. My grandfather had said: “Don’t let Seva in, the child mustn’t see this.” Later, he crossed the garden for the last time, on a stretcher carried by male nurses.

Esteban Volkov remained in Mexico for the rest of his life. He retained a close relationship with Natalia Sedova until her death, at the age of 79, in 1962. He became an engineer and excelled in that field. Volkov married and is survived by four daughters.

Surviving his grandfather by nearly 83 years, Esteban Volkov’s defense of the legacy of Leon Trotsky was most significantly expressed in his efforts to preserve as a museum the villa on the Avenida Viena in Coyoacán where the great revolutionary spent the final 16 months of his life.

Esteban Volkov deserves to be honored as the last surviving member of Trotsky’s immediate family, who was deprived of his father, mother, uncle, grandfather and grandmother by the bestial crimes of the Stalinist regime, lived with Trotsky during the final years of the great revolutionary’s life, was himself wounded in the assassination attempt of May 24, 1940, witnessed the horrifying events of August 20-21, 1940, and—in the 80 years that followed—remained loyal to the socialist principles and memory of his grandfather.



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