

# The ICFI's investigation exposed the GPU conspiracy to murder Trotsky

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*The following is the speech by Eric London to “An Island at the Center of World History: Trotsky on Prinkipo” on Sunday, August 20. The event was held on Prinkipo, an island in the Sea of Marmara off the coast of Istanbul, Turkey. It honored Trotsky’s four-year exile on the island, from 1929 to 1933.*

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*WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North’s remarks to the commemoration are published here. The full recording can be accessed at Trotsky.com.*

Eighty-three years ago today, Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution, was attacked by an agent of Stalin’s secret police who had been allowed to enter his home-in-exile in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. The assassin, whose real name, Ramón Mercader, would not be known for another decade, was apprehended by guards and arrested. An American named Sylvia Ageloff, who had introduced the assassin into the Trotsky household by falsely claiming he was her husband and who had lured one of Trotsky’s guards out of the house that night, was also arrested. Trotsky was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead at 7:30 in the evening of August 21, 1940.

Trotsky’s assassination was the most consequential political assassination of the 20th century. It was the culmination of the Stalinist Great Terror and the product of one of world history’s bleakest and bloodiest conspiracies. Though Trotsky commanded no army, occupied no official position of state and had been stripped of his citizenship, the Stalinist bureaucracy harnessed the full power of the Soviet state and brought it down on Trotsky in a ruthless and desperate attempt to silence him forever.

The political ground for the assassination plot was prepared by an international campaign of lies and falsifications concocted by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Through the monstrous Moscow Trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938, Stalin eliminated the leadership of the party during the October Revolution, and Trotsky was sentenced to death in absentia. The show trials were used to justify and perpetrate the Great Terror of 1936-39, in which Stalin and the GPU murdered hundreds of thousands of Old Bolsheviks, Trotskyists, scientists, artists, writers and military leaders.

From the executive offices in Moscow’s Lubyanka, high-ranking GPU officials working on Stalin’s orders under Pavel Sudoplatov directed the operation to kill Trotsky. The tentacles of the Great Terror reached far beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. In July 1937, the GPU kidnapped and murdered Erwin Wolf, an important political secretary to Trotsky. In September 1937, the GPU assassinated Ignatz Reiss, who had defected from the GPU and declared his support for the Fourth International. In February 1938, the GPU killed Trotsky’s son, Leon Sedov, in Paris. Later that year, in July 1938, Stalin’s agents kidnapped Rudolf Klement, the secretary of the Fourth International, whose headless and limbless torso

was discovered in the Seine.

Trotsky was well aware that he lived “on this earth not in accordance with the rule but as an exception to the rule,” as he wrote. No matter the pressure on him, his family and closest supporters, he analyzed the plot against him from the standpoint of uncovering and exposing the true role of the Stalinist bureaucracy. In an article completed days before his death, he clearly explained that the source of the Stalinist conspiracy against him lay in the counterrevolutionary character of the bureaucracy, which had usurped power in Russia. He wrote:

The Moscow oligarchy’s hatred of me is engendered by its deep-rooted conviction that I “betrayed” it. This accusation has a historical meaning of its own. ... Only after the bureaucracy became convinced that I did not intend to defend its interests against the toilers but on the contrary the interests of the toilers against the new aristocracy was the complete turn toward Stalin made, and I was proclaimed “traitor.” This epithet on the lips of the privileged caste constitutes evidence of my loyalty to the cause of the working class.

Stalin was ultimately able to assassinate Trotsky with the assistance of the world’s most powerful imperialist governments, who shut their doors to Trotsky the moment he was deported from the Soviet Union to Turkey in January 1929. One by one, the governments of “democratic” Europe slammed their doors in Trotsky’s face, even as protests grew demanding he be granted the democratic right to asylum. One such protest was authored by Albert Einstein, who wrote to German Social Democratic Finance Minister Rudolph Hilferding on March 14, 1929, “If ... the Herr Minister will not allow the wounded lion Trotzki to enter, and give him asylum, then ... if he weren’t a Minister I would grab him by his ear...”

The great “democratic” governments of Germany, Great Britain, Luxembourg, France, Norway and Belgium denied Trotsky the democratic right to enter. He did not even bother applying for asylum in the United States, knowing the reactionary government would deny him. The *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* opposed granting asylum because doing so “would make a highly unfavorable impression in some quarters abroad which are concerned in the stability of Germany’s financial credit.”

The imperialist governments feared the power of the revolutionary ideas imbued in Trotsky’s lifelong struggle for socialism. British Labour MP George Lansbury would recall that when the question of Trotsky’s asylum was debated at a cabinet meeting of Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, “The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary [J.R. Clynes] and the Home Secretary [Arthur Henderson] replied: ‘there he is in Constantinople, out of the way—it is to nobody’s interest that he should be anywhere else. We are all afraid of him.’”

A June 24, 1929 document uncovered in 2000 by *The Guardian*

revealed that Home Secretary Clynes opposed granting entry to Trotsky because “Trotsky’s supporters in other countries, France and Germany, would be encouraged and it would have its effect on their communist parties.” In other words, Trotsky’s very existence threatened capitalism.

The period of Trotsky’s Turkish exile marked an intense escalation of the GPU operation against Trotsky and the Left Opposition. GPU agents worked themselves into prominent positions in the Trotskyist movement, including the Soblevicius brothers, known by their party names Senin and Well, who played leading roles in the German Left Opposition. Abraham Soblevicius, later known as Jack Soble, visited Trotsky in Prinkipo and would later admit in US federal court to being a longtime GPU agent.

One critical event from Trotsky’s time in Prinkipo bears mentioning as a milestone in the GPU conspiracy against Trotsky. In the summer of 1929, a former secretary to Trotsky named Jacob Blumkin came to Prinkipo and met with Trotsky, agreeing to carry a message of political support to the Russian Opposition back with him to the Soviet Union. Blumkin was discovered and turned over to the GPU, who shot him on November 3, 1929. The historian Vadim Rogovin wrote that the assassination of Blumkin was “the first bloody reprisal against an oppositionist.” The precedent was set.

The GPU encirclement of Trotsky is, of course, only one side of the story of his time in Turkey. As David North has explained, Trotsky produced perhaps his most extraordinary political work while on this island. It was here that he wrote *My Life* and the *History of the Russian Revolution* and fought systematically to mobilize the German and international working class against the disastrous rise to power of Hitler. In 1933 he was allowed to enter France, then in 1935 he was granted entry to Norway, which deported him to Mexico in December 1936. Mexico and Turkey were the only two countries who welcomed Trotsky and never succumbed to pressure to deport him.

For decades following Trotsky’s assassination, almost nothing was known about how the GPU carried out his murder. It was not until the International Committee launched an investigation into the assassination 35 years later, in May 1975, that the true details of the assassination became publicly known.

In that 35-year period, from 1940 to 1975, none of those responsible for the assassination of Trotsky, his family or the leaders and members of the Fourth International had been brought to account for their crimes. Ramón Mercader, the assassin, had been released from prison and was welcomed by Che Guevara into Cuba before traveling to the Soviet Union, where the killer was celebrated by the bureaucracy.

But *Security and the Fourth International* began to reveal the truth.

This investigation entailed an immense amount of work, spanning multiple continents, involving hundreds of hours of interviews and thousands of pages of historical documentation. For the first time, a systematic investigation was conducted into the penetration of the Trotskyist movement by agents of both the GPU and the government of US imperialism. Questions were posed which, had they been asked and investigated decades prior, could have prevented significant damage to the movement and its members and saved or prolonged the lives of the leadership, including Trotsky’s. David North played the central role in this investigation from its initiation.

*Security and the Fourth International’s* work has now spanned a half century. And as a result of this investigation, we now know far more about the depth of the GPU network within the Trotskyist movement. We know that Sylvia Callen, the personal secretary of James P. Cannon, leader of the American section of the Trotskyist movement, the party that was responsible for Trotsky’s security in Mexico, had been an agent. *Security and the Fourth International* revealed that Callen had admitted to being a GPU agent in US federal court, and that from 1939 to 1947, critical years, she had passed all critical documents relating to the membership of the Fourth International from James Cannon’s desk to her GPU handlers a

few blocks away in downtown New York City.

We also now know that Trotsky’s secretary in Mexico City, Joseph Hansen, had been an agent of the GPU. Documents released from the US National Archives showed that immediately after Trotsky’s assassination, Hansen held meetings with the US Embassy in which he informed them that in 1938, just two years earlier, he had been meeting with the leader of the GPU spy ring in the United States, Dr. Gregory Rabinowitz. Hansen then became an agent of the US government, while rising to the leadership of the American section until his death in 1979. Documents uncovered by *Security and the Fourth International* would show that he agreed to provide the FBI with “information” in exchange for “impunity.” He held these meetings behind the back of the leadership of the American Trotskyist movement.

Sylvia Ageloff is another GPU agent uncovered through *Security and the Fourth International*. Shortly after the assassination, the GPU, Ramón Mercader and Joseph Hansen worked to present her as the innocent dupe of Mercader, a naïve young woman who was supposedly wooed and used to enter Trotsky’s compound in Coyoacan. Unfortunately, this false myth has been uncritically adopted in films and documentaries about the assassination. But we now know that the entire edifice upon which this myth was built is false. Ageloff’s sisters had visited the Soviet Union in 1931 and met with Lenin’s wife, Krupskaya, at a time when such a meeting would have required high-level connections to the Stalinist bureaucracy. Ageloff was not a naïve girl who was easily tricked. She had received an advanced degree in psychology from Columbia University and wrote her thesis on the subject of the susceptibility of people to be deceived by those they trust.

Based on the evidence now available, it is clear that Ageloff was not only a GPU agent, but that she was sent by the GPU to Mexico City in the summer of 1940 when Mercader hesitated to deliver the final blow and carry out the assassination himself. After the assassination, she was arrested by Mexican police, who prosecuted her for murder and refused to believe that she could have failed to recognize who Mercader really was after the more than two years they allegedly spent in a relationship together.

The conclusion of the Mexican police was shared by the FBI, which referred to her, in reports uncovered through the *Security and the Fourth International* investigation, as a “tough customer” who “may never tell all she knows that might be useful in determining just what was behind the killing of Trotsky.” Francisco Cabeza de Vaca, the Mexican prosecutor who argued she was guilty, received death threats from the GPU, specifically mentioning her role, and he was subsequently murdered by the GPU on the street after the sentencing of Mercader. Critical historical work was recently carried out in this regard by the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Penales, and by the work of the late criminologist Martín Gabriel Barron Cruz.

It is not possible to restate here all the facts showing Ageloff’s guilt here, but in the past two-and-a-half years since the *World Socialist Web Site* published a four-part article detailing those facts, nobody has stepped forward with any evidence to the contrary.

Trotsky was anything but fatalistic about his physical security. The powers of the Stalinists were immense, but there was nothing inevitable about the assassination that took place 83 years ago. Under conditions of extraordinary isolation, when the GPU had murdered or driven almost his entire family to death, Trotsky maintained an absolutely objective and revolutionary attitude towards his own life and role in history. He wrote in the final paragraphs of *My Life*:

Since my exile, I have more than once read musings in the newspapers on the subject of the “tragedy” that has befallen me. I know no *personal* tragedy. I know the change of two chapters of

the revolution. One American paper which published an article of mine accompanied it with a profound note to the effect that in spite of the blows the author had suffered, he had, as evidenced by his article, preserved his clarity of reason. I can only express my astonishment at the philistine attempt to establish a connection between the power of reasoning and a government post, between mental balance and the present situation. I do not know, and I never have, of any such connection. In prison, with a book or a pen in my hand, I experienced the same sense of deep satisfaction that I did at the mass meetings of the revolution.

These moving words, written on this island, personify a life dedicated to revolutionary struggle and the liberation of mankind from capitalism. Trotsky's beliefs, our beliefs, remain not only immensely relevant today, but necessary to understand and respond to the present crisis in a world confronting imperialist war, climate catastrophe, a raging pandemic and record levels of social inequality. Trotsky remains, as David wrote in the introduction to *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, an individual whose historic role was absolutely unique. David wrote:

Trotsky was both the leader of the first socialist revolution and also the implacable opponent of the Stalinist regime that subsequently betrayed that revolution. The Soviet Union no longer exists and the Stalinist regime has disappeared into the "dustbin of history." But Trotsky remains a relentlessly contemporary political figure. The significance of his life in world history transcends his role in the Russian Revolution. Leon Trotsky was, above all else, the great tribune and theoretician of world socialist revolution. The passions evoked by his name testify to the enduring significance of Trotsky's ideas. Arguments about Trotsky are never simply about what happened in the past. They are just as much about what is happening in the world today, and what is likely to happen in the future.

The Trotskyist movement today—the International Committee of the Fourth International—is honored to be here in Prinkipo, not only to remember the life of Leon Trotsky but to take forward the cause to which he gave the last full measure of his devotion. And we are gratified that interest in Trotsky's life and his politics is winning a broader audience among workers and young people in struggle all over the world today, as evidenced by today's historic event.



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