

2025 Summer School Lecture 4 Part 2

The Stalinist terror in the Communist International and its impact

Katja Rippert
21 September 2025

The following lecture was delivered by Katja Rippert, a member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), at the SEP (US) International Summer School, held August 2-9, 2025. It is the second part of a three-part lecture on the Great Terror in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. The first part, "Political genocide in the USSR (1936-1940): The Moscow Trials and the Dewey Commission," was posted September 18.

The WSWS is also publishing two chapters from Vadim Rogovin's book Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938: Political Genocide in the USSR to accompany this lecture: Chapter 38, "Terror against Foreign Communists" and Chapter 42, "Bolshevism, Stalinism, Trotskyism." We encourage our readers to study this book alongside the lecture.

The WSWS will be publishing all the lectures at the school over the coming weeks. The introduction to the school by SEP National Chairman David North, "The place of Security and the Fourth International in the history of the Trotskyist movement," was published on August 13.

Introduction

The Stalinist political genocide in the 1930s discussed by Fred Williams in the first part of this lecture also targeted the Communist International. In my lecture, I will focus on the terror in the Comintern, which was initially built as a revolutionary world party. By 1923, it already had more than 50 sections, as indicated in this impressive internal list.^[1]

In that year, the Comintern set all its hopes on a revolution in Germany, which had the largest Communist party outside of Russia.

This photo shows the Presidium of the First Congress of the Comintern in 1919.

In the middle is Lenin, and on his right are Gustav Klinger, a Russian Bolshevik and leader of the Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans in 1918, and Hugo Eberlein, a founding member of the German Communist Party (KPD). Seated on Lenin's left is Fritz Platten, a long-time communist and founding member of the party in Switzerland. He organized Lenin's return to Russia in 1917 and saved the latter's life in 1918, when Lenin's car was attacked in Petrograd.

Less than 20 years after this photograph was taken, Klinger, Eberlein, and Platten were all persecuted during the Stalinist Great Terror. The Comintern as a revolutionary world organization was in the process of being destroyed. Supporters of the Left Opposition in the various national sections had already been expelled or intimidated. By the 1930s the Comintern had been transformed into an instrument of Soviet diplomatic

policy.

According to the nationalist program of the Stalinist bureaucracy, summed up in the theory of "socialism in one country," it was no longer the task of the International to prepare and coordinate revolutions in other countries. Its role was reduced to preventing an imperialist intervention against the USSR, following the line of the Kremlin under Stalin's dictates.

One defeat after another isolated and weakened the Soviet Union. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 marked the culmination of the disastrous policies of the Comintern.

From all over the world, thousands had emigrated to the Soviet Union—workers, students, professionals, party members, or just enthusiasts and supporters of the first workers state. Many of them sought refuge in the USSR, because they were threatened with political persecution at home—especially the Germans after 1933.

As a result of the betrayals of the two German workers parties, the KPD and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Hitler came to power and set out to destroy the socialist movement in Germany and Europe. Thousands of communists and social democrats, as well as Jewish workers and intellectuals, had to flee from the Nazis. They now belonged to the so called *politemigranty*—the "political emigrants."

However, the USSR, the supposed country of refuge, turned out to be a trap: in the Great Terror a large number of these political émigrés and foreign communists in the USSR were arrested, accused of being "foreign spies" and shot or exiled. It is hardly possible to grasp the scale of the bloodbath by merely looking at statistics, and until the present there are still no exact numbers of victims for the different sections of the Comintern. But I want to give you a few facts.

- The largest and most influential group of political emigrants were the approximately 4,600 **Germans**. During the Stalinist terror around 3,000 disappeared. By April 1938, 70 percent of German communists living in the USSR had already been imprisoned.

- Around 600 **Austrians** fell victim to Stalin, among them workers as well as members of the Communist Party and the Schutzbund, the paramilitary arm of the Social Democrats, who fled Austria after the failed uprising against the pro-fascist government in February 1934.

- The **Polish** party was dissolved and almost its entire leadership was killed. Twenty-five out of 26 leading Polish Comintern cadres died in the Soviet Union.

- Some 800 **Yugoslav** communists were murdered, including all the eight leading Comintern cadres and many supporters of the Left Opposition.

- The majority of the political emigrants from **Hungary** were persecuted. Ten out of 16 members of the first Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party were killed by Stalin.

- Approximately 600 **Bulgarian** communists perished in the Stalinist

terror.

- A high percentage of party members from the **Baltic countries** were arrested. Seven out of eight Latvian and five out of six Estonian leading Comintern cadres were persecuted.

- Forty political refugees from **Greece** were arrested, among them former party leaders as well as former Trotskyists. Twenty-seven were sentenced to death.

- More than 100 **Italian** communists were arrested and most of them shot.

- Many **Chinese, Korean, and Japanese** communists fell victim to the repression.

Several communist parties in Europe were illegal at that time and operated entirely or partially underground, including in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Italy, and Greece. Their members were accused of “espionage” in the USSR and suffered the greatest losses.

Beginning with its leader Grigory Zinoviev as the prime target in the first show trial in 1936, the Comintern staff was reduced by about 50 percent in the following years of terror. One historian has analyzed the fate of the 375 leading Comintern cadres who were in the Soviet Union from 1936 onward and could therefore be potential victims of persecution. More than 40 percent of them were arrested.^[2]

Causes and aims of the Comintern purges

Before I provide some examples to illustrate the scale of the purges in the second part of my lecture, I want to turn to the causes and aims behind these horrendous crimes.

How was it possible that a whole generation of Comintern members was killed by the Stalinists?

Many bourgeois historians have struggled to answer this question. Some claim that the terror was the logical outcome of the totalitarian nature of the Comintern itself or the result of paranoia, arbitrary violence, and the blood thirst of the dictator Stalin.

As the Trotskyist movement has insisted and certain serious historians have underscored in their research, the key to understanding the terror within the Comintern is the fear of the Stalinist regime that a revolutionary opposition could challenge its power.

In February 1937, Stalin expressed his deep contempt for the Comintern in a conversation with the Bulgarian Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov. He said: “All of you there in the Comintern are playing right into the enemy’s hands.”^[3]

This remark was no mere slip of the tongue. It expressed the Stalinist bureaucracy’s hostile stance toward this organization which—despite having long since ceased to be a revolutionary world party—still embodied internationalism in its structure, in the composition of its personnel and above all in the eyes of its supporters around the globe. This tradition was a thorn in Stalin’s side at a time when he stoked Russian nationalism.

The terror within the Comintern was driven by the nationalist reaction of Stalinism to the program of world revolution, the foundation of the Third International.

The catastrophic results of the Comintern policies, like the victory of Hitler in 1933, deepened the Soviet Union’s isolation and discredited the Comintern among masses of workers and youth around the world. In the face of this crisis, the purges in the Comintern were aimed at reinforcing the position of the Stalinist regime. The latter feared the international defeats could provoke criticism within its ranks and strengthen the Trotskyist opposition.

As the Russian historian Vadim Rogovin stressed in his book *Stalin’s Terror of 1937–1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*:

The ferocity of the persecution of the foreign communists was explained to a significant degree by Stalin’s fear that socialist revolutions in other lands might arise outside his control. As a result, the center of the revolutionary movement might shift from Moscow, and the movement itself might end up under the leadership of the Fourth International.^[4]

Rogovin also pointed to the fact that the emigrants had better access to oppositional literature, and some had read Trotsky’s books.

The Stalinist regime resorted to mass violence to suppress and preempt any potential resistance within the communist movement and the broader population.

As German historian Hermann Weber has explained:

All forces that, because of their revolutionary tradition, could become dangerous to Stalinism were eliminated in the bloody purge. The aim was to destroy cadres who, in some situations (for example, crisis or war), could form a counterforce to Stalin’s dictatorship. In that sense, the terror was also an indicator of the weakness of the Stalinist system. Power was to be consolidated by brute force.^[5]

The arrests initially targeted the Left Opposition and other former opponents of the regime, but then expanded to wide layers of members loyal to Stalin—including many of the political émigrés. With this comprehensive “purge,” Stalin sought to create a new apparatus loyal to and uncritical of his interests.

Stalin’s violence against any real or potential opposition was not a product of mere paranoia, but rooted in the objective contradictions of his regime as well as the international defeats.

Popular Front and Comintern terror

While the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, arrested Comintern members and political émigrés in Moscow, Communist parties in Spain, France, and elsewhere formed so-called “anti-fascist Popular Front alliances.” This simultaneous occurrence of popular front politics and terror has been described by some historians as a “great paradox.”^[6]

In fact, however, the two developments were intertwined. After the failures of the preceding years—most notably the KPD’s policy in Germany that enabled Hitler—the Stalin regime shifted towards open collaboration with the Western powers, particularly France and Great Britain.

According to the popular front strategy, adopted at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935, Communist parties were to enter alliances with bourgeois parties and governments whenever it served the goals of Stalinist foreign policy. During this period the Comintern was tasked with suppressing revolutionary uprisings in Western European countries in exchange for diplomatic agreements with the respective governments. Repression served to silence critical voices in order to safeguard the popular front.

David North explains:

The turn by the USSR toward direct collaboration with the international bourgeoisie was complemented by the intensification

of state repression within the borders of the degenerated workers state. The inner connection between these parallel processes is generally ignored by bourgeois historians, who find it politically inconvenient to examine why the heyday of popular frontism—when Stalinism was being feted in the salons of the intellectual trend-setters—coincided with the wholesale extermination within the USSR of virtually all those who had played a leading role in the October Revolution and the civil war.

The blood purges which were launched with the opening of the first round of the Moscow Trials in August 1936 were intended not only to eradicate all those who might become the focus of revolutionary opposition to the bureaucracy, but also to demonstrate to the world bourgeoisie that the Stalinist regime had broken irrevocably with the heritage of 1917. A river of blood now divided Stalinism from Bolshevism.^[7]

Campaign against Trotskyism in the Comintern

The 1936 show trials in Moscow were preceded by an intensified campaign against “Trotskyism,” launched in the Comintern after its Seventh World Congress. The situation for political emigrants in the USSR had already worsened since the early 1930s when asylum policies were restricted. In the winter of 1935—parallel to the turn towards the popular front strategy—the Comintern bureaucracy expanded surveillance of foreign members. Political emigrants had to be re-registered—numerous dismissals and party expulsions followed.

The Comintern journal *Communist International* played a significant role in the campaign against “Trotskyism” on the eve of the terror.

In November 1935, representatives from various Comintern sections met in Moscow for an editorial meeting about the danger of Trotskyism, chaired by Palmiro Togliatti, then a leading member of the Italian CP and the Comintern. Avoiding here the hysterical and stereotypical anti-Trotskyist propaganda designed for public consumption, the Comintern members spoke relatively honestly about their concern that the Trotskyists and their ideas might gain a foothold within their own ranks, as well as among youth and the working class in general.

Togliatti urged that the question of Trotskyism be addressed “more forcefully” than before, given the growth of the Communist parties. He examined in more detail the Trotskyist and opposition groups in Western Europe and stressed that the small size of their organizations was not decisive. While in the Soviet Union, there were “special organs” that would “deal with” the Trotskyists—he obviously refers to the NKVD—the situation was different abroad:

In capitalist countries we must argue, we must respond, we must study the Trotskyists’ arguments, and we must understand in what ways and through what means they can influence newcomers to the workers movement and the left elements of social democracy—and how we can block their path to these elements and to the workers movement as a whole.^[8]

Togliatti pointed to the problem that some European workers would see Trotskyism as “just another tendency within the workers movement” and rank-and-file members would “unconsciously” repeat Trotsky’s arguments. Especially disastrous was the stance toward Stalin. “Once, at a school, I asked what students knew about Stalin. And what did they know? Nothing at all! This is also a task for us,” explained Togliatti.

In the discussion, the Austrian delegate agreed that “we have so far utterly failed to popularize Stalin’s significance among Europe’s working class.” The Comintern had nothing written “in opposition to Trotsky’s pamphlets, which are stylistically and journalistically brilliantly written.” He argued: “I believe we must not underestimate the immediate effect that Trotsky’s books can have. We cannot respond with mere resolutions and theses.”

This was followed by contributions on the Trotskyist influence in other countries including the Netherlands, Sweden, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Poland, France, Greece, and Czechoslovakia. The Dutch delegate suggested a pamphlet that “popularized Lenin’s struggle against Trotsky,” because “Trotskyism always tries to work with Lenin’s name—Lenin and Trotsky, the two leaders of the Russian Revolution.”

This pointed to a core problem for the Stalinists: despite extensive historical falsifications since the 1920s, the masses worldwide still associated the October Revolution with Lenin and Trotsky—not Stalin.

This editorial meeting illustrates the dilemma faced by Comintern functionaries. On the one hand, they needed strong arguments to refute Trotskyists abroad while they could be persecuted by “state organs” at home. On the other, Trotskyist arguments were rooted in various objective truths—Stalin’s marginal role and Trotsky’s importance in the October Revolution, social inequality in the Soviet Union, and the negative consequences of popular frontism. The Stalinists responded to this dilemma with slander, falsification, repression, and terror.

The scale of the terror in the Comintern

This “river of blood” separating Stalinism from Bolshevism found expression in the physical destruction of the Comintern during the years 1937 and 1938, even though it was not formally dissolved until 1943.

The German party was a main target of repression. The defeat of the German working class and Hitler’s victory were a decisive setback for the world revolution. It confirmed Trotsky’s positions, who had warned early on against the fatal “social fascism” line and fought for a correct policy against the Nazis—the united front of communist and social democratic workers. Stalin’s position was clearly weakened, hence the hysteria against anyone who voiced criticism and, generally, all KPD members who had fled Hitler.

The repression of German communists on charges of Trotskyism were bizarrely linked to accusations that they were fascist agents. In reality, it was Stalin himself who facilitated the eventual Nazi invasion in 1941 by decapitating the Red Army, sealing the pact with Hitler, and ignoring all warnings of the imminent attack.

Historian Hermann Weber examined the fate of leading German communist cadres up to 1945 and concluded: 256 became victims of Hitler and 208 victims of Stalin.^[9] When we look at the highest level, the German party’s Politburo [political bureau], more members and candidates were murdered by Stalin than by Hitler.

Seven former Politburo members or candidates were killed during the Stalinist terror: **Eberlein** (1887–1941), the German delegate at the Comintern Founding Congress, arrested in 1937 and executed in 1941. **Leo Flieg** (1893–1939), a founding member of the KPD and a friend of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. He worked for the Comintern in Moscow in the early 1930s where he lived in the Hotel Lux. He was arrested in 1938 and shot in March 1939—at the age of 45. The fervent Stalinists **Hermann Remmele** (1880–1939) and **Heinz Neumann** (1902–1937), as well as **Fritz Schulte** (1890–1943), **Hermann Schubert** (1886–1938), and **Heinrich Sußkind** (1895–1937), an Austrian of Jewish origin.

And one might add another indirect victim: **Ernst**

Stalinist KPD leader until his arrest by the Nazis in 1933, who was in prison for 11 years. Stalin could have saved his life in negotiations with the Germans. But as part of the Hitler-Stalin Pact he decided not to. Thälmann was finally executed on the order of Hitler in 1944.

Many German party members were arrested in the Hotel Lux. Once the famous and prestigious living quarters of the Comintern in the heart of Moscow, the “Lux” turned into a death trap during the Great Terror. The emigrants lived in constant fear, trembling each night if they were to be next, if secret police agents would be knocking on their door.

The Comintern apparatus, however, was both a perpetrator and a victim of the terror. The Comintern institutions closely collaborated with the secret police and provided detailed information on the biographies and political positions of every member.

Those functionaries who survived the purges were often directly implicated in the crimes. One example is the German Stalinist Herbert Wehner, who lived in the Hotel Lux during the height of the terror. Under his party name “Kurt Funk,” he denounced German émigrés and KPD members such as Flieg and Eberlein to the NKVD.

Wehner sent reports to the Comintern on Trotskyist groups abroad and alleged Trotskyists among German émigrés. His reports served in part as the basis for an edict issued by NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov in February 1937. Yezhov ordered the immediate examination and arrest of German Trotskyists, the infiltration of foreign Trotskyist groups, and the uncovering of supposed Trotskyists among German visitors and emigrants to the USSR. Special focus was placed on monitoring convicted German Trotskyists in labor camps.^[10]

After the war, Wehner, who had been responsible for the persecution of many political refugees, rose rapidly in German Social Democracy. He became a minister in the 1960s and led the SPD fraction in parliament until 1983. Until his death he kept silent about his own role in the Stalinist purges.

Other Comintern apparatchiks who survived the Great Terror were also implicated in these crimes. For instance, Dimitrov, who succeeded Zinoviev as leader of the Comintern during the Popular Front period. He was a fierce and longtime opponent of the Left Opposition. During the purges, Dimitrov abetted the persecution of the Polish communist leaders by luring them to the Soviet Union where they were arrested and executed by the NKVD.^[11]

The German party functionaries Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht, who became the leaders of the GDR (German Democratic Republic), the East German Stalinist regime, after the war, both held high positions in the Comintern bureaucracy during the Great Terror and facilitated the liquidation of German communists.

In 1937 the Stalinist regime prepared another show trial—this time against the Comintern itself. Investigators collected material on an alleged “Anti-Comintern bloc,” with veteran functionaries like Hungarian Béla Kun accused of a fictional “right-wing Trotskyist” conspiracy within the Comintern apparatus. All of them were executed in the following years.^[12]

This Anti-Comintern trial did not take place, but even without it, the purges within the Comintern reached vast proportions. Yet Stalin continually demanded a harsher approach: “Trotskyites must be hunted down, shot, destroyed,” he declared, according to a diary entry by Dimitrov in November 1937.^[13]

“Mass operations” and the turn against the Soviet nationalities policy

Parallel to the public show trials, the NKVD launched secret mass operations, starting with the so-called “Kulak operation” in summer 1937.

~~The Germans~~ shook the whole country.

Many political émigrés were persecuted as part of the “national operations” of the NKVD against various nationalities and minorities in the Soviet Union, including Germans, Poles, Greeks, Latvians, Estonians, Romanians and others.

The accusation of “espionage” was combined with additional charges, such as the alleged founding of national insurrectionary organizations. Designated as “Greek,” “German,” etc. were not only individuals with the corresponding citizenship or ethnic origin, but all those whom the NKVD considered to belong to the respective national group or had some kind of “foreign connections.” According to estimates, up to 365,000 people were convicted, approximately 80 percent of them sentenced to death.^[14]

These operations marked the final and brutal break of the Stalinist regime with the Soviet nationalities policy established in the time of Lenin. The “Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia” was one of the first decrees issued by the Bolsheviks after taking power. Among other things, the November 1917 declaration proclaimed equality and sovereignty of the various peoples of Russia, the right to self-determination and the free development of national minorities and ethnic groups. The declaration’s principled and strategic significance was to strengthen internationalism against the old great-power chauvinism of the Tsarist regime, win over the anti-imperialist and national revolutionary movements and consolidate the revolution in the periphery and among the previously oppressed minorities.

But already in 1922, a fierce dispute arose between Lenin and Stalin on the national question because Stalin supported Russian chauvinist tendencies. In the years that followed, the Stalinist leadership undermined the nationalities policy and ultimately abolished it. Prior to the mass arrests, it had already fueled xenophobia and revived Great Russian nationalism. Emigrants were accused of being “spies” and used as scapegoats to divert growing anger about social and economic problems in the USSR.^[15]

In December 1937, the Politburo decided to eliminate the national territories, as well as the schools and cultural institutions of national minorities, on the grounds that they were under the influence of supposed “enemies of the people.”

The persecution of Greek political refugees

The “Greek Operation” was launched in the same month. Greek schools, theaters, newspapers and publishers in the USSR were shut down and their staffs persecuted. According to an official report, more than 11,000 people were arrested and 9,450 shot. One researcher estimates that the number of victims was twice as high.^[16]

Almost all the Greek political émigrés who lived in the Soviet Union at that time were ultimately arrested. In Greece, they had been persecuted under anti-communist laws and many of them escaped from prison before clandestinely fleeing by sea to the USSR.

In the photo you can see five workers in a Greek prison in the early 1930s. Except for one, they all fled to the Soviet Union and perished during the terror. Some were members of the Greek Left Opposition. In the USSR they worked in factories until they were arrested, interrogated about their Trotskyist activities and executed by the NKVD.

One of them was **Michalis Bezantakos**. As a worker in the industrial port city of Piraeus, he joined a Trotskyist organization. Arrested by Greek police in 1931, he faced the death penalty, but was able to escape with the help of the Communist Party in a spectacular prison break in Athens. A famous song about his courageous story is still being sung at Greek demonstrations.

In Moscow, Bezentakos took the pseudonym “Georgi Bendas,” married and worked in an automobile factory. During the purges he was arrested and executed, leaving behind his wife and three-year-old daughter.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Greece celebrated Bezentakos for a long time as a working class hero who had fought and died as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. Rumors about his arrest in the Soviet Union were dismissed as anti-communist lies. Bezentakos’ case is symptomatic of the decades-long cover-up by the Greek Stalinists of the persecution of Greek political émigrés.^[17]

The truth was buried for years. The documents from his NKVD file published only a few years ago revealed his true fate. It must be stressed that these investigations were a pseudo-legal farce without a hint of due process. The results of interrogations and supposed “confessions” were falsified or extracted through torture. Bezentakos was accused of espionage and executed on April 11, 1938.

Two decades later, during the 1950s, he was rehabilitated but his family received a false death certificate, claiming he died of illness in 1942. This was typical. Many families were not informed about the real circumstances of the deaths of their loved ones until the end of the Soviet Union.

Other Greek victims were convinced Stalinists and former party leaders, cadre students and journalists. In Greece, in August 1936, after the police suppression of a massive strike movement, the anti-communist Metaxas dictatorship came to power. Therefore, when the show trials began, the Greek émigrés were not able to return home—like the German communists. Many applied to the Comintern to be sent to Spain as fighters in the International Brigades, but most of them were denied and instead arrested.

Purge and closure of cadre schools

The years of the terror also saw the purge and closure of academic institutions and cadre universities, initially founded after the Russian Civil War to educate foreign and domestic students and lecturers. These included the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West (KUNMZ), the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), the International Lenin School and the Institute of Red Professors.

In the 1920s, the opposition had significant support in the universities, also among foreign students from China and Yugoslavia. Even during the 1930s, foreign students expressed doubts and criticism about Stalin’s policies.

Young Chinese student **Ma Yuansheng** (1906–1977) obtained Trotsky’s pamphlet criticizing the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928 and the Stalinist betrayal in China. He built an opposition group at the International Lenin School, which was dissolved in 1930. Approximately 100 Chinese students at another university took part in a Trotskyist group. Ma Yuansheng was arrested and sent into Siberian exile for 25 years. Back in China, he was again imprisoned as an “old Trotskyist” by Mao during the Cultural Revolution.^[18]

Ante Ciliga (1898–1992), a founding member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, worked as a teacher at the Communist University of the West. Together with Yugoslav students he supported the Left Opposition in 1929, but was denounced, sacked from the cadre school and eventually arrested. After five years in prison, an international campaign and a hunger strike, he was able to leave the USSR in 1935, just before the Great Terror started. However, the other students were killed by the secret police—as was the Yugoslav communist and former leader of the Comintern youth, **Vojislav Vujovi?** (1897–1936), who had supported the United Opposition in the 1920s.

Mass arrests of foreign communists, students, scientists, and artists

A whole layer of scientists, intellectuals, artists, students and workers from around the globe were caught up in the wave of mass arrests. I want to offer a few examples:

The German-Jewish mathematician **Fritz Noether** (1884–1941) fled from the Nazis to the Soviet Union, where he continued his research as a professor at the University of Tomsk. In 1937 he was arrested. A letter from Albert Einstein to the Soviet foreign minister in his support couldn’t save him. Noether was sent to a labor camp and executed in 1941.

Another victim was the young German economist **Nathan Steinberger** (1910–2004). He was invited to study and work at the Institute of Agricultural science of the Comintern in Moscow and emigrated to the Soviet Union with his wife Edith in 1932. As a communist with a Jewish background he couldn’t return to Nazi Germany, and thus was trapped when the Great Terror began. The NKVD arrested him in April 1937. He spent almost ten years in a forced labor camp in Siberia. His wife was arrested in 1941. The Steinbergers survived and returned to East Germany after the war.

Despite his experiences in the Gulag, Nathan remained unbroken. He developed great sympathy for the work of the Trotskyists and met with representatives of the WSWS for interviews and discussions on several occasions. In an interview in 1997 in Berlin he stressed:

Precisely because I have remained a socialist, I am a declared opponent of Stalinism. The Soviet Union did not collapse because it was a socialist state, as the anticommunists always claim, but because everything socialist was destroyed by Stalin. He discredited socialism in the foulest way possible and contributed decisively to the crisis of the workers movement following the end of the Soviet Union.

Renowned artists like German actress **Carola Neher** (1900–1942) didn’t escape the NKVD either. From 1926 Neher worked closely with dramatist Bertolt Brecht in Berlin, who wrote several roles especially for her. After 1933 she and her husband Anatol Becker, a communist from Bessarabia, emigrated to the Soviet Union where both of them perished in the terror.

Brecht didn’t use his international reputation to rescue her. The German Trotskyist **Walter Held** (1910–1942) sharply criticized Brecht for his silence. In an article in the Trotskyist newspaper *Unser Wort* Held wrote:

The saddest and most shameful chapter in this bloody tragedy is the attitude of the official German emigration towards the fate of its members who emigrated to the Soviet Union. ... You, Mr. Brecht, knew Carola Neher. You know that she was neither a terrorist nor a spy, but a brave person and a great artist. Why are you silent?^[19]

This comment was written in October 1938. A few years later, Held himself ended up in an NKVD prison in Moscow. Held—his real name was Heinz Epe—had fled Germany after the Reichstag Fire to Prague, then Oslo. He became a secretary of Trotsky and one of the organizers of his entry into Norway. The Gestapo was searching for him as a “leading functionary of the Trotsky movement.”

After the German invasion of Norway, Held eventually tried to emigrate to the US with his family. However, the travel route via Moscow proved

fatal. The NKVD arrested him on a train in May 1941. He was sentenced to death for “counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activities” and shot in 1942, at the age of 31. His wife died in prison.

One of Held’s fellow prisoners in Moscow was the Polish socialist Henryk Erlich, a leader of the Jewish Bund. He and another Bund leader were eventually killed by the NKVD in the 1940s.

As the cases of Held and the Bund leaders show, the persecution did not end after 1938. During the period of the Hitler-Stalin Pact 1939–1941, the Stalin regime handed over at least 350 German and Austrian emigrants to the Gestapo. While expulsions to Germany had taken place in earlier years, this time there were more Jews and communists among them—many expelled straight from the Gulag.^[20]

For example, **Margarete Buber-Neumann** was the wife of the murdered German party’s Politburo member Heinz Neumann. In 1940, she was extradited from a labor camp in Kazakhstan to Germany where she was immediately sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp for another five years.

An important account of the events and atmosphere in the Soviet Union by a German political émigré can be found in the memoirs by **Wolfgang Leonhard** (1921–2014), who later broke with Stalinism. His mother was arrested during the Great Terror and he witnessed the purges as a young man.

In one chapter, Leonhard remembers Trotsky’s death in 1940 as a significant moment. On August 24, Soviet newspapers briefly reported that Trotsky had died in Mexico after being attacked by someone from his own entourage. *Pravda* denounced Trotsky as an “international spy and murderer.”

That evening, Leonhard spoke with a former Schutzbund member working in a Soviet factory. “Can it really have been one of his entourage?” he asked, voicing the same doubts Leonhard had felt. As they walked, they saw posters going up for a festival in the Park of Culture. The man added, “Do you know what some of the workers in the factory are saying? They say that this festival has been announced now just because of Trotsky’s death.” Leonhard stayed silent—talking about Trotsky was still dangerous. Yet he found it striking that thirteen years after Trotsky’s expulsion, some workers still rejected the official story and believed Stalin capable of celebrating the killing of this revolutionary.^[21]

Leonhard studied in 1942 at the Comintern School near Ufa. He recalls that the students never had access to Trotsky’s writings. The seminar on Trotskyism was limited to angry denunciations. In hindsight, Leonhard understood this was deliberate: the Stalinist leadership saw no danger in students reading fascist or bourgeois texts, but feared that Marxist critiques of Stalinism—like Trotsky’s—could seriously challenge their worldview and influence students.

Suppression of revolution in Europe and the persecution of Trotskyists after World War II

At the end of the Second World War, Leonhard became part of the “Ulbricht group,” composed of a number of leading German Stalinists, led by Walter Ulbricht, who were sent from Moscow to East Germany in 1945. There, they dissolved the spontaneously formed anti-fascist and factory committees. As Leonhard commented, this dissolution was “nothing other than a disruption of the first emergence of what might prove to be a powerful independent anti-Fascist and Socialist movement.”^[22]

After the war, the Stalinists continued their agenda of preventing revolution in Europe and suppressed the Trotskyist movement with brutal methods.

In 1947 the young Austrian Trotskyist and resister **Karl Fischer** (1918–1963), who had just survived the Buchenwald concentration camp, was kidnapped by the NKVD and deported to the Gulag. He had been one of the authors of the Trotskyist declaration of Internationalist Communists from the Buchenwald camp.

In 1948, the German Trotskyist worker **Oskar Hippe** (1900–1990) was arrested by the NKVD in East Germany and imprisoned for seven years.

In 1953, the German-Czech Trotskyist and former secretary of Trotsky in Prinkipo, **Wolfgang Salus** (1909–1953), was poisoned by a GPU agent in Munich.

In France, Italy and Greece, where the Communist parties led huge resistance movements against the Nazi invaders, it was their Stalinist leaderships who played a key role in preventing a revolutionary upheaval at the end of the war. In Greece they assassinated Trotskyists. The counterrevolutionary policies of Stalin resulted, in 1949, in the Greek bourgeois forces winning the Civil War.

In the following years, the CPs tried to cover up the murder of their own members during the Great Terror. In Greece the Stalinist KKE openly justifies the Moscow Trials up to the present.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to return to the beginning of this lecture. The turn of the Stalinist bureaucracy against the program of world revolution resulted in the extermination of a whole “generation of the Comintern.” This mass terror was aimed at suppressing and preventing any serious political opposition to Stalin’s regime within and outside the Soviet Union.

These crimes had an enormous global impact. The Communist parties and the Left Opposition around the world lost a large part of their leadership, which was especially devastating in countries under fascist and authoritarian rule. Most importantly, the terror dealt a severe blow to the consciousness of millions of left-wing workers who were appalled at and confused by the events.

Given this bloody end of the Third International, the founding of a new International—the Fourth International—in 1938, in the midst of the Great Terror, was a question of life and death for the international working class. Despite Stalin’s efforts to distort or destroy all that remained of the October Revolution, Trotsky organized a world Marxist party to carry forward the fight for socialism. The defeat and betrayal of the revolution in Spain the following year, which Alejandro Lopez will address in the next lecture, proved how timely the founding of the Fourth International was.

Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fond 495, opis 18, delo 213, list 6–7. This document is available online.

Peter Huber, “Das Führungskorps der Komintern. Ein Soziobiographischer Querschnitt”, in: Michael Buckmiller/Klaus Meschkat (eds.), *Biographisches Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Berlin: Akademie 2007, pp. 231–240.

The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933–1949, ed. by Ivo Banac, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2003, p. 52.

Vadim Rogovin, *Stalin’s Terror of 1937–1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*, Oak Park: Mehring Books 2009, p. 307.

Hermann Weber, “Einleitung”, in: Hermann Weber and Ulrich Mählert (eds.), *Terror. Stalinistische Parteisäuberungen 1936–1953*, Paderborn: Schöningh 2001, p. 17. All non-English quotations are translated by the author.

Kevin McDermott/Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern. A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

1996, pp. 142–143.

David North, Introduction to: *Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed*, Oak Park: Mehring Books 1990, available in the WWS Marx Library.

RGASPI f. 496, op. 1, d. 2, l. 29–96.

Hermann Weber, “Zum Verhältnis von Komintern, Sowjetstaat und KPD. Eine historische Einführung”, in: Weber et al, *Russland, Deutschland, Komintern. I. Überblicke, Analysen, Diskussionen*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, p. 113.

Reinhard Müller, “Denunziation und Terror: Herbert Wehner im Moskauer Exil”, in: Jürgen Zarusky (ed.), *Stalin und die Deutschen*. Neue Beiträge der Forschung, München: Oldenbourg 2006, pp. 46–47.

William J. Chase, *Enemies within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2001, pp. 274–275.

Reinhard Müller, “Der Antikomintern-Block – Prozeßstruktur und Opferperspektive”, in: UTOPIE kreativ 81/82 (July/August 1997), pp. 82–95.

The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, p. 67.

Marc Junge, *Bolschewistische Ordnung in Georgien. Der Große Terror in einer kleinen kaukasischen Republik*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2015, p. 34.

On the conflict in 1922 see: Vadim Rogovin, Was There an Alternative? 1923–1927. Trotskyism: A Look Back Through the Years, Oak Park: Mehring Books 2021, chapter 9, pp. 83–102.

Report of the Commission of the CC of the CPSU, 9.2.1956; Ivan Džucha, Gre’eskaja operacija: Istorija repressij protiv grekov v SSSR, St. Petersburg: Aleteija 2006, p. 396.

Nikos Papadatos, “O Bezentakos mas afise gia.” Oi diokseis ton Ellinon kommouniston stin ESSD 1937–1938, Athens: Kapsimi 2021; State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 10035, op. 1, d. P-54560 (NKVD file of Georgi Bendas).

Alexander Pantsov/Daria Spichak, “New Light from the Russian Archives. Chinese Stalinists and Trotskyists at the International Lenin School in Moscow, 1926–1938”, in: *Twentieth Century China* 33 (2008), pp. 38–41; Kitayskie revolyutsionery v sovetskoy Rossii (1920–1930-e gody), Moscow 2018, p. 243; Chinese Wikipedia (accessed 29.7.2025).

Walter Held, “Stalins deutsche Opfer und die Volksfront”, in: *Unser Wort* (Nr. 4/5, October 1938), pp. 7–8, quoted in: Michael Rohrwasser, *Der Stalinismus und die Renegaten. Die Literatur der Exkommunisten*, Stuttgart: Metzler 1991, p. 163.

Hans Schafranek/Natalia Musienko, “The Fictitious ‘Hitler-Jugend Conspiracy’ of the Moscow NKVD”, in: Barry McLoughlin/Kevin McDermott (eds.), *Stalin’s Terror. High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, London: Palgrave 2003, p. 219.

Wolfgang Leonhard, *Child of the Revolution*, Chicago: Henry Regnery Co. 1958, pp. 94–95.

Ibid., p. 325.

[1] Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fond 495, op. 1, d. 2, l. 29–96, delo 213, list 6–7. This document is available online at <https://www.wsws.org/rgaspi/fond495/op1d2l29-96/d213list6-7>.

[2] Peter Huber, “Das Führungskorps der Komintern. Ein Soziobiographischer Querschnitt”, in: Michael Buckmiller/Klaus Meschkat (eds.), *Biographisches Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Berlin: Akademie 2007, pp. 231–240.

[3] *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933–1949*, ed. by Ivo Banac, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2003, p. 52.

[4] Vadim Rogovin, *Stalin’s Terror of 1937–1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*, Oak Park: Mehring Books 2009, p. 307.

[5] Hermann Weber, “Einleitung”, in: Hermann Weber and Ulrich Mählert (eds.), *Terror. Stalinistische Parteisäuberungen 1936–1953*, Paderborn: Schöningh 2001, p. 17. All non-English quotations are translated by the author.

[6] Kevin McDermott/Jeremy Comintern. Agnew, *International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1996, pp. 142–143.

[7] David North, Introduction to: *Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed*, Oak Park: Mehring Books 1990, available in the WWS Marx Library.

[8] RGASPI f. 496, op. 1, d. 2, l. 29–96.

[9] Hermann Weber, “Zum Verhältnis von Komintern, Sowjetstaat und KPD. Eine historische Einführung”, in: Weber et al, *Russland, Deutschland, Komintern. I. Überblicke, Analysen, Diskussionen*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, p. 113.

[10] Reinhard Müller, “Denunziation und Terror: Herbert Wehner im Moskauer Exil”, in: Jürgen Zarusky (ed.), *Stalin und die Deutschen*. Neue Beiträge der Forschung, München: Oldenbourg 2006, pp. 46–47.

[11] William J. Chase, *Enemies within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2001, pp. 274–275.

[12] Reinhard Müller, “Der Antikomintern-Block – Prozeßstruktur und Opferperspektive”, in: UTOPIE kreativ 81/82 (July/August 1997), pp. 82–95.

[13] *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, p. 67.

[14] Marc Junge, *Bolschewistische Ordnung in Georgien. Der Große Terror in einer kleinen kaukasischen Republik*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2015, p. 34.

[15] On the conflict in 1922 see: Vadim Rogovin, Was There an Alternative? 1923–1927. Trotskyism: A Look Back Through the Years, Oak Park: Mehring Books 2021, chapter 9, pp. 83–102.

[16] Report of the Commission of the CC of the CPSU, 9.2.1956; Ivan Džucha, Gre’eskaja operacija: Istorija repressij protiv grekov v SSSR, St. Petersburg: Aleteija 2006, p. 396.

[17] Nikos Papadatos, “O Bezentakos mas afise gia.” Oi diokseis ton Ellinon kommouniston stin ESSD 1937–1938, Athens: Kapsimi 2021; State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 10035, op. 1, d. P-54560 (NKVD file of Georgi Bendas).

[18] Alexander Pantsov/Daria Spichak, “New Light from the Russian Archives. Chinese Stalinists and Trotskyists at the International Lenin School in Moscow, 1926–1938”, in: *Twentieth Century China* 33 (2008), pp. 38–41; Kitayskie revolyutsionery v sovetskoy Rossii (1920–1930-e gody), Moscow 2018, p. 243; Chinese Wikipedia (accessed 29.7.2025).

[19] Walter Held, “Stalins deutsche Opfer und die Volksfront”, in: *Unser Wort* (Nr. 4/5, October 1938), pp. 7–8, quoted in: Michael Rohrwasser, *Der Stalinismus und die Renegaten. Die Literatur der Exkommunisten*, Stuttgart: Metzler 1991, p. 163.

[20] Hans Schafranek/Natalia Musienko, “The Fictitious ‘Hitler-Jugend Conspiracy’ of the Moscow NKVD”, in: Barry McLoughlin/Kevin McDermott (eds.), *Stalin’s Terror. High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, London: Palgrave 2003, p. 219.

[21] Wolfgang Leonhard, *Child of the Revolution*, Chicago: Henry Regnery Co. 1958, pp. 94–95.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 325.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)