Hakim Adi's "Pan-Africanism and Communism": A pro-Stalinist attempt to erase the Trotskyist alternative — Part Ten

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This is the tenth part of an 11-part series responding to British-based historian Hakim Adi's recently republished book, Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939.

Adi defends the decapitation of Marxist leadership at the Moscow Trials and the Purges

The most sickening feature of Adi's book is his defence of the Moscow Trials and the Great Purges. This fact alone establishes Adi's book as an exercise in crude Stalinist apologetics and historical falsification. Responding to unnamed critics who questioned his failure to address Stalinist repression in his first edition, Adi states in the introduction to the second edition:

> Other reviewers lamented the fact that I did not say more about what they termed "Stalinist repression,"[!] events that occurred within the Soviet Union during the 1930s. The fact [is] there is much new literature on that period, some of it appearing in Russia, for those who are interested in such matters. With the rise of fascism internationally and the attempts of the imperialist systems states, headed by Britain and the United States, to encourage and direct this against the Soviet Union, as well as anti-government conspiracies and terrorism internally, it cannot be considered surprising that policing activities increased in the Soviet Union during this period. It is also well known that this situation was exploited by unscrupulous people, including very senior people, many of whom were later themselves arrested and made to answer for their crimes. In those tragic circumstances many innocent people as well as guilty ones lost their lives, including two members of the South African Communist Party who were of Latvian origin.[1]

This is a revolting falsification of history. Decades of historical scholarship have exposed the frame-ups, the manufactured Show Trials, and the systematic use of torture and mass executions which led to the physical annihilation of an entire generation of revolutionary Marxists. Nearly one million people were killed in this wave of counterrevolutionary violence.

As historian Vadim Rogovin established in *Stalin's Terror of 1937–1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*, the repression was not indiscriminate. It was a politically directed campaign to exterminate socialist opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy and destroy the generation that embodied the revolutionary traditions of October 1917. It dealt a devastating blow to the revolutionary consciousness of the Soviet and international working class, whose consequences have reverberated for generations.

Between 1936 and 1938, the Stalinist regime staged three public Moscow Trials in which much of the surviving leadership of the October Revolution faced outlandish accusations of terrorism, sabotage, espionage and collaboration with Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. At the first trial, in August 1936, all sixteen defendants were sentenced to death, including Grigory Zinoviev, introduced earlier by Adi as the first president of the Communist International. In the third trial, in March 1938, Bukharin—who also occupies an important place in Adi's account, especially in the development of the Comintern's policy towards South Africa—was also condemned and executed.

The Moscow Trials' central target was Leon Trotsky. Although in exile, Trotsky was the principal accused, charged in absentia with organising a vast conspiracy of terrorism, sabotage and espionage against the Soviet Union. The trials and the campaign surrounding them also prepared the ground for Trotsky's own assassination. On August 21, 1940, Trotsky was killed by Ramón Mercader, an agent of Stalin's secret police. The murder was the most consequential political assassination of the 20th century.

Countless leading figures in the Comintern, the organisation that Adi's book purports to examine, were killed in the Stalinist purges. Yet Adi passes over these events, falsely implying that Stalinist repression was limited to the Soviet Union.

Rogovin has documented how Stalin's repression was directed "With no less fury … against revolutionary emigrants, members of the international communist movement." He explains that "in the mid-1930s, several tens of thousands of foreign communists were living in the Soviet Union." Some worked in the Comintern, Profintern and Communist Youth International, while others worked in Soviet institutions. Many non-party émigrés were granted asylum because they had been persecuted for defending workers, scientific activity, or participation in national-liberation struggles. He estimated that 80 percent of these people were repressed during the Great Purge. He notes that among the first arrested were founders of foreign Communist parties, participants in the early Comintern congresses, and former members of the left wing of the Second International.[2]

The scale of destruction wreaked on the Comintern was staggering.

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Approximately 4,600 German Communist political émigrés were living in the Soviet Union; around 3,000 disappeared during the terror, and by April 1938 some 70 percent of the German Communists in the USSR had been imprisoned. Twenty-five of the 26 leading Polish Comintern cadres in the Soviet Union died. Around 800 Yugoslav Communists were murdered. Hundreds of Austrian and Bulgarian Communists perished, while refugees and political émigrés from Greece, Italy, Hungary, the Baltic states and elsewhere were subjected to arrest, imprisonment and execution. The Comintern staff itself was reduced by approximately half, while more than 40 percent of a studied group of 375 leading Comintern cadres present in the USSR from 1936 onward were arrested.[3]

Among the victims was Osip Piatnitsky, one of the most important officials of the Communist International during the 1920s and early 1930s. Piatnitsky opposed the mass repression. He was arrested by the NKVD in October 1937, imprisoned for a year, summarily condemned and executed on October 30, 1938. Adi repeatedly cites Piatnitsky and describes his activities, but omits any reference to his horrible fate.

The terror also struck directly at figures involved in the anti-colonial movement. Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, the Indian revolutionary and former secretary of the League Against Imperialism—an organisation to which Adi devotes extensive attention—was arrested and shot in 1937. Two other Indian revolutionaries who had made their way to the Soviet Union were likewise executed.[4]

For African and African American revolutionaries, Stalinist repression was anything but distant. The fate of Albert Nzula is particularly significant. Nzula was the first black general secretary of the Communist Party of South Africa and one of the most important African Communists of his generation. After arriving in Moscow in 1931, he worked in the orbit of the Comintern and Profintern, contributed to *The Negro Worker* and collaborated with Soviet Africanists on *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa* (1932).

His experience in the Soviet Union brought him into conflict with the Stalinist bureaucracy. Edwin Mofutsanyana, the veteran black South African Communist who was in Moscow with him, later recalled that Nzula expressed "Trotskyite and anti-Stalinist sentiments" and had questioned Stalin's leadership. Comintern officials subjected him to disciplinary proceedings and decided he should not be allowed to return to South Africa because they feared he might "infect" the party with his political views.

Nzula died in Moscow in January 1934, before the Moscow Trials and before the Great Terror reached its height. Adi accepts the official explanation offered by Stalinist officials, remarking that Nzula "remained in Moscow until his death in 1934".[5] In an accompanying footnote , he states that "Nzula suffered from alcoholism, which was a major contributory factor to his death of pneumonia."[6]

Adi conceals the political controversy surrounding Nzula's death. CLR James later reported, based on information attributed to Jomo Kenyatta, who was in Moscow at the time, that Soviet security officials had seized Nzula. George Padmore told South African then-Trotskyist Charlie van Gelderen that, shortly before Padmore's own break with the Communist movement, Nzula had warned him not to come to Moscow. Paul Trewhela, a former South African Communist Party member, subsequently drew attention to these accounts and to the evidence of Nzula's growing hostility toward Stalinism.[7]

The fate of one of the most important figures in African Communism is stripped of its political significance, with Adi taking it upon himself to shield the Stalinist bureaucracy from any scrutiny.

The fate of the African American Communist Lovett Fort-Whiteman is less ambiguous. Fort-Whiteman was a pioneer of Communist work among black workers in the US, helped establish the American Negro Labor Congress, participated in the Comintern and later lived in the Soviet Union. When the repression intensified, he tried to leave the USSR. But he was arrested in 1937, exiled and subsequently sentenced to forced labour in Kolyma, where the brutal conditions of imprisonment led to his death in January 1939.

Internal Communist documents denounced Fort-Whiteman for alleged Trotskyism. One mid-1930s report stated that he had "showed himself for Trotsky," while in 1938, CPUSA Comintern representative Pat Toohey declared, "Whiteman is a Trotskyist."

While Adi's book heavily draws upon the life of Fort-Whiteman—he is cited more frequently than Trotsky and Stalin combined—he reduces the fate of this African American Communist to a single footnote: "Fort-Whiteman died in prison in the Soviet Union in 1939."[8]

The mass purges extended directly into the Communist Party of South Africa. Lazar Bach and the brothers Paul and Maurice Richter were caught in the terror after travelling to the Soviet Union. The Richter brothers were executed in 1938, while Bach was imprisoned and died in a Soviet camp in 1941. More than fifty years later, at its Seventh Congress in 1989, the SACP posthumously reinstated all three after receiving information from the Soviet Communist Party that they had been convicted on the basis of "false evidence extracted from them by the Soviet security authorities."[9]

For Africa, the terror's consequences went far beyond the destruction of individual revolutionaries. Stalinist repression tore apart the institutional apparatus through which the Comintern had attempted to study Africa and educate African cadres to provide revolutionary leadership.

The African Department of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East and the African section of the Research Association for the Study of National and Colonial Problems were abolished in 1936–37. Georgy Danilov, a pioneer of African linguistic studies in Moscow, was expelled from the Communist Party on accusations of "Trotskyite propaganda," arrested and shot in 1937. A. Z. Zusmanovich, who had collaborated with Nzula on *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa* (1932), was removed from his work, while I. I. Potekhin was also dismissed. Research on Africa in Moscow was effectively shattered.

A study by historians Hilary Lynd and Thom Loyd noted that, "Amid escalating terror, Soviet interest in Africa and the diaspora largely disappeared. Soviet Africanists and Comintern officials who had been interested in Africa faced repression because of their contacts with foreigners. Many were sent to camps; some perished there."[10]

Stalinist counterrevolutionary violence also extended to the Caribbean. Sandalio Junco was an Afro-Cuban communist, a leading trade unionist, and the Cuban representative in the ITUCNW's early work. Adi records Junco's prominent intervention on the "Negro Question" at the founding congress of the Confederación Sindical Latinoamericana, his role liaising between the ITUCNW and the Latin American trade-union movement, and his appointment as vice-chair of the RILU Negro Bureau with responsibility for Latin America and the Francophone Caribbean. He acknowledges in a footnote that Junco later became "one of the leaders of Trotskyism in Cuba" and was expelled from the Cuban Communist Party after returning to the island in 1932.

But Adi refuses to explain that Junco was assassinated by Stalinist gunmen on May 8, 1942, at a meeting in Sancti Spíritus commemorating the revolutionary Antonio Guiteras. Armed Communist Party militants stormed the gathering and opened fire, killing Junco and two others. Junco's assassination effectively decapitated the Trotskyist movement in Cuba, depriving the Caribbean of one of its most experienced revolutionary leaders. This weakened the revolutionary Marxist opposition in Cuba, with profound implications for the subsequent development of the island's socialist movement, paving the way for the Stalinist alliance with Cuban petty-bourgeois guerrilla forces led by Fidel Castro that would emerge in the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

Perhaps the most repugnant aspect of Adi's defence of the Moscow Trials and the Great Purges is his concluding recommendation: "There is

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much academic literature on the subject from historians such as J. Arch Getty and Grover Furr."[11]

Furr is not a historian but a notorious Stalinist apologist whose writings are devoted to rehabilitating Stalin and vindicating the fraudulent Moscow Trials. Over the past 15 years, Furr has produced an extraordinary volume of Stalinist apologetics, publishing some 18 books, including *Khrushchev Lied* (2011), *Trotsky's Amalgams: Trotsky's Lies, the Moscow Trials as Evidence, the Dewey Commission*, Volume One (2015), *Yezhov vs. Stalin* (2016), *Leon Trotsky's Collaboration with Germany and Japan* (2017), *The Fraud of the Dewey Commission* (2018), *The Moscow Trials as Evidence* (2018), *Stalin: Waiting for ... the Truth!* (2019), *Trotsky's Lies* (2019), *New Evidence of Trotsky's Conspiracy* (2020), *Trotsky and the Military Conspiracy* (2021), *The Fraud of the Testament of Lenin* (2022), *Trotsky's Comintern Conspiracy: The Case of Osip Pyatnitsky* (2024), and *Khristian Rakovsky: Trotsky's Japanese Spy* (2025). The depths of this scoundrel's defence of Stalin are exposed in his declaration:

> There is not now, nor has there ever been, any evidence that the Moscow Trials were dishonest – staged or fabricated. On the contrary: we have a great deal of evidence that they were honest, and that the defendants were guilty of at least the crimes to which they confessed. [12]

Adi's recommendation of Grover Furr says far more about Adi's own political outlook than it does about Furr himself. To recommend Furr as an authority on the Moscow Trials is an intellectual disgrace, comparable to directing students studying the Holocaust to the writings of David Irving, the notorious Holocaust denier.

Adi compounds this by placing Furr alongside J. Arch Getty, an established academic historian whose interpretations of Stalinism are themselves open to criticism but whose archival scholarship cannot be equated with Furr's apologetics. This juxtaposition brazenly frames Furr's views as part of a legitimate historical debate.

The consequences of the Stalinist terror for the future struggles of the African masses would be far-reaching. At precisely the moment when a young African proletariat was beginning to emerge and African and African American revolutionaries were being drawn toward Marxism by the immense authority of the October Revolution, Stalinism destroyed the cadres, institutions, and intellectual connections through which the revolutionary experiences of October might have been transmitted to them. Stalinism erased an entire line of political continuity.

One cannot understand the subsequent dominance of bourgeois nationalist movements and leaders in the post-war anti-colonial struggles without reckoning with the Stalinist counterrevolutionary terror. It does not lie outside the subject of a history of the Comintern on the "Negro Question". It is central to it.

To be continued.

Op cit., p. XIX.

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[1] Op cit., p. XIX.

[2] Vadim Z. Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937–1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*, trans. Frederick S. Choate (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2009), pp. 303–307.

[3] Katja Rippert, "The Stalinist Terror in the Communist International and Its Impact," *World Socialist Web Site*, September 21, 2025.

[4] Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West*, 1918–1939 (London: Hurst & Company, 2008), p. 379.

[5] Op. cit. p. 274.

[6] Op. cit. p. 487, footnote nº 82.

[7] Paul Trewhela, "The Death of Albert Nzula and the Silence of George Padmore," *Searchlight South Africa*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 1988, pp. 64–69. Available at Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/nzula-padmore.pdf

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[11] Op cit., p. XIX.

[12] Grover Furr, "A Critique of Jean-Jacques Marie, 'La collaboration Staline-Hitler,'" December 2021–January 2022, Montclair State University, https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrg/research/notes_on_marie_0122.html

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