

Toronto International Film Festival 2016: Part 2

The Chosen, on Trotsky, and other political subjects

By David Walsh
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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 8-18). Part 1 was posted September 27.

The appearance of an honest and accurate film about the plot to assassinate Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940 is a welcome—and long overdue—event. No comparable figure in history has been so lied about and vilified.

As noted in a previous article, *The Chosen (El elegido)*, written and directed by Spanish filmmaker Antonio Chavarrías (born 1956), was not publicly presented at the Toronto film festival. I was able to see it at a private screening.

The film, a Spanish-Mexican production, was reportedly five years in the planning.

The Chosen begins with a short sequence of black-and-white documentary footage that explains Trotsky's role in the Russian Revolution and his ultimate decision, in the face of "Stalin's crimes," to organize the Fourth International.

The dramatic portion of the film begins in Spain where Ramón Mercader (Alfonso Herrera), the future assassin, is fighting with the Republican forces against Franco. He is recruited by the GPU (or NKVD at the time), the Soviet Stalinist secret police, and its official, Nahum Eitingon, alias Kotov (Julian Sands). His mother, Caridad del Río (Elvira Mínguez), is a devoted Stalinist. Mercader receives training in the Soviet Union. One of the secret police thugs informs Mercader that "truth and reality don't exist," only one's subjective view of things is real. "It is easier to lie," he is told.

In Paris in the summer of 1938 Mercader, now calling himself "Jacques Mornard," and passing as a Belgian, is introduced to Sylvia Ageloff (Hannah Murray), an American Trotskyist and a lonely young woman. She falls for the handsome Mercader and they begin an affair. Later, he travels to the US and then Mexico City, and she follows him there in January 1940.

The various strands of the plot unfold. In May 1940, a unit led by painter David Alfaro Siqueiros (Alejandro Calva) attacks Trotsky's house in Mexico city with machine guns and explosives. Miraculously, Trotsky (Henry Goodman) and his wife, Natalia Sedova (Frances Barber), are unhurt. One of the guards turns out to be a Stalinist agent. Trotsky predicts to the Mexican police, "Next time they won't fail." He also tells police officials he has been informed the would-be assassin is coming from Spain.

Kotov and Mercader's mother, both now in Mexico City, prompt and coach Mercader. When he expresses doubts about the mission, he is told to keep them to himself and simply obey orders. In one scene, Kotov repeats the Stalinist claims that Trotsky is in the pay of the Gestapo and the Japanese government. Mercader says, more or less, "You don't

believe that any more than I do." He practices with his ice-axe.

Meanwhile, the guards at Trotsky's compound, including Harold Robins (Toby Harper), are suspicious of Mercader, who attempts to ingratiate himself with the household. One of the guards, Otto (Brontis Jodorowsky), tells the Spaniard to his face he doesn't trust him. However, on August 20, 1940, Mercader is able to carry out his horrendous deed.

Chavarrías has chosen to portray Trotsky and his supporters in a generally sympathetic light. Goodman was an excellent choice. It may be difficult to reproduce Trotsky's gravitas, but the veteran British actor gives him great intelligence, humor and a depth of emotion. The acting in general is fine. Murray as Sylvia Ageloff is perhaps the weakest, but the role may be the most difficult and painful in some ways.

Trotsky-Goodman is not on screen that much of the time. If one had to find fault with *The Chosen*, it would be with its relative lack of political discussion in a film about intensely political human beings. Perhaps the writer-director did not feel entirely confident in this sphere, or it may be he was fearful that audiences would be bored by the discussion of ideas. Much of the concentration here is on the complicated and elaborate logistics and organization of the Stalinist plotting and far less on the reasons why it is taking place.

In any case, the central figures here are Mercader and the other conspirators. The opening sequences, in which the future assassin is in battle against the Spanish fascists, are cause for some anxiety. Will the film portray Mercader as a misguided but courageous individual, as someone who sincerely thought he was advancing "Communism" by striking a blow against a "traitor"?

By various dramatic means, and in particular through a scene in Mexico City where Mercader meets an old comrade from Spain, Chavarrías very effectively demonstrates that the assassin is the cynical traitor who has broken from any allegiance to communist ideals.

The writer-director—as actor Alfonso Herrera explained in an interview with the Associated Press in Mexico City during the filming in 2015—has obviously done a great deal of research and taken considerable pains to get things right. Now, it remains to be seen how and when the film will reach the public!

For the most part, Leon Trotsky has not been served well by the cinema, as we have noted before on the WWSW. Given the pragmatic, often fetid character of the film world and the inevitable difficulties it would have in grasping a figure like Trotsky, with his uncompromising adherence to principles, this may not be so surprising. His life and death would make for great drama, but the issues bound up with his revolutionary struggles remain explosive and demanding.

We will never know how Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein planned to treat Trotsky in *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928). The Soviet filmmaker was obliged to re-edit his almost-finished film and cut

all references to one of the principal organizers and leaders of the October Revolution.

According to film historian Olga Romanova, Stalin himself appeared in the editing room on November 7, 1927 “and ordered the immediate removal of all scenes featuring Trotsky [from Eisenstein’s film].” That morning, the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution, the GPU had attacked members of the Left Opposition carrying banners calling for “genuine workers’ democracy” and opposing opportunists and bureaucrats.

In early Hollywood films, Trotsky appeared briefly as a character in W.S. Van Dyke’s *Manhattan Melodrama* (unsympathetically) and in Michael Curtiz’s *British Agent* (more sympathetically), both released in 1934.

The same Curtiz, a veteran of the Hungarian Revolution of 1919, directed the disgraceful *Mission to Moscow*(1943), the high point of the alliance between the Roosevelt administration, the Hollywood studios, American left-liberalism and the Stalinist apparatus. Based on the memoir of former US ambassador to the USSR, Joseph Davies, the film presents a glowing picture of a happy, prosperous Soviet population and whitewashes the Moscow Trials—in which Stalin wiped out those who organized and led the October Revolution—in the most pernicious and lying manner.

Many talented people participated in this atrocity, including actors Walter Huston, Ann Harding, Oskar Homolka, George Tobias, Gene Lockhart, Eleanor Parker, Henry Daniell and screenwriter Howard Koch (*Casablanca*, also directed by Curtiz).

The *New York Times*’ chief film reviewer at the time, Bosley Crowther, in line with the newspaper’s general approach to Stalin’s purges, wrote: “Particularly will it [*Mission to Moscow*] anger the so-called Trotskyites with its visual re-enactment of the famous ‘Moscow trials.’ For it puts into the record for millions of moviegoers to grasp an admission that the many ‘purged’ generals and other leaders were conspirators in a plot—a plot engineered by Trotsky with the Nazis and the Japs to drain the strength of Russia and make it an easy victim for conquest.”

For the most part, Joseph Losey’s *The Assassination of Leon Trotsky* (1972) is a cold, unpleasant work, in which Richard Burton is directed to play Trotsky as a pedantic, self-important and irritable windbag. Losey, blacklisted in Hollywood, came from the Stalinist milieu. Mercader (Alain Delon) seems to have mainly psychological problems and very little of the GPU plot comes out. Julie Taymor’s *Frida*(2002), about Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo, is an even poorer film, with Geoffrey Rush as Trotsky.

Thus, the appearance of a sympathetic and conscientious film about Trotsky, in the midst of a global radicalization, has a certain objective significance.

“Left-wing” films and other problems

A number of other ostensibly “left-wing” films, or films that raise the history and nature of Stalinism, were screened in Toronto.

I, Daniel Blake is the latest work from British filmmaker Ken Loach, a Trotskyist decades ago. It is the story of a joiner [carpenter in the US] in the Northeast of England who has a heart problem and encounters endless bureaucratic red tape and heartlessness in his efforts to obtain sickness benefits. Loach seems determined to turn himself into the cinema’s principal defender of old-style Labour Party reformism and the welfare state. The performers are sincere enough, but the film is fairly insipid and forgettable.

The Dardenne brothers, from Belgium, are also worn-down leftists. *The Unknown Girl* centers on a young female doctor running a working class clinic. After she refuses a young woman admittance to her office late at night, the woman—an African immigrant—turns up dead. The doctor takes great efforts to discover her identity. Presumably, the Dardennes have the

larger refugee crisis in mind and, again, the actors demonstrate genuine sincerity. However, like many of the brothers’ films, *The Unknown Girl* is dull and, in the end, a drama merely of individual “moral responsibility.”

As noted in Part 1, the films from Eastern Europe and Russia remain weak by and large, either misanthropic and despairing or self-servingly, lazily anti-communist—or both. It is not easy, but the artists have the responsibility to study the history of the 20th century and distinguish between Stalinism and socialism. The figure of Trotsky is unavoidable in such serious study.

Romanian films tend to be among the more clear-sighted. *The Fixer*, directed by Adrian Sitaru, involves a Romanian trainee at a prominent French news network. When two under-age Romanian prostitutes are sent back from Paris to their native country, creating a scandal, this may be his big break. The film is a picture of a corrupt, headline-hungry media and its flunkies. Along the way, we see something of the desperate poverty in Romania.

Damis Tanovic’ *Death in Sarajevo* takes place on the 100th anniversary of the event that helped trigger World War I, the assassination of Austria’s Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. The immediate setting is the Hotel Europe, on the verge of bankruptcy. Bosnian and Serb nationalists face off. A French blowhard politician gets ready to pontificate about the Balkan wars. Gangster-capitalists operate out of the hotel’s basement. The hotel’s workers, who have not been paid in two months, ready themselves for a strike ...

Tanovic is a sharp observer. The weakness in his films is a tendency toward masochistic and misplaced collective guilt. More or less: “Why do we in the Balkans set on another every fifty years? Why are we such monsters?” The real concrete-historical problems of Stalinism and imperialist conspiracy are not adequately treated.

Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker made several interesting and observant films about the Iraq war and its associated tragedies: *Gunner Palace* (2004), *The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair* (2006) and *How to Fold a Flag* (2009). They have been conspicuously silent on America’s foreign wars over the past seven years.

Tucker and Epperlein have now combined to direct *Karl Marx City*, about Epperlein’s early years and family in Stalinist East Germany (German Democratic Republic, DDR). Epperlein was born in the Saxon city known as Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1953 to 1990. It has now gone back to its earlier name, Chemnitz.

The film is intriguing in certain ways. Its driving force is Epperlein’s investigative efforts in German archives to discover whether or not her father, who committed suicide in 1999, had been a Stasi (East German secret police) informer. This leads her to interview her mother and her two brothers, among others. Her mother rejects an entirely stereotyped view of life in the DDR. “It wasn’t so terrible.” She rejects reducing existence there to the Stasi.

When Epperlein, the narrator, tells us that the East German population was the most surveilled in history, one simply groans. The Stasi’s operations were child’s play compared to the NSA’s. The film is intelligent and aesthetically pleasing, but strangely non-committal. Epperlein never poses the most searching questions: Was this socialism? What were the consequences of capitalist restoration? What does the future hold for the “reunited” German people?

From the Czech Republic, *We Are Never Alone*, is a “nihilistic black comedy” (Toronto film festival website) about a small rural town. Everyone is more or less miserable and desperate, including a prison guard who keeps all the rooms of his house locked. “People are scum,” he says, “I’m writing a book about it.” There are potentially valuable elements here of a satire or a critique, but the film, directed by Petr Vaclav, doesn’t make much of them.

Afterimage is the latest film by veteran Polish director Andrzej Wajda. It treats the last years in the life of avant-garde artist W?ady?aw

Strzemiński in postwar, Stalinist Poland. Strzemiński had identified with revolutionary movements in art and politics in the 1920s. The Polish Stalinist officials feared and oppressed him, kicking him out of the artists' association and depriving him of making a living. He died in 1952.

Wajda's film is perfectly well-made and much of it rings immediately true, but the director, now a foaming-at-the-mouth anti-communist, is obliged to avoid a whole series of historical issues. The "Socialist Realism" that was the state-artistic doctrine in Stalinist Poland had nothing to do with socialism or realism, it was the "aesthetic" expression of the bureaucracy's reactionary nationalist outlook. Why does Wajda not turn his attention as well to the present conditions in "free, democratic" Poland, where the vicious, reactionary ruling elite edges closer and closer to authoritarian, police-state rule?

To be continued

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