Leon Trotsky and the Barcelona 'May Days' of 1937

During the past several decades evidence has come to light which proves that Leon Trotsky lied a great deal in order to cover up his conspiracies against the Stalin regime in the USSR.[1] The present article demonstrates how this evidence changes the conventional understanding of the assassinations of some Trotskyists, presumably at the hands of the Soviet NKVD and Spanish communists, during the Spanish Civil War.

This article makes four main points.

1. German and Francoist agents were indeed involved in starting the "Barcelona May Days' revolt of May 3 – May 7, 1937, against the Republican government.

2. One or more of Trotsky's agents was involved in planning, initiating, and vigorously supporting the Barcelona May Days revolt of 1937.

3. The uncovering in the USSR of the military conspiracy known as the "Tukhachevsky Affair" was the spark that set off the determined Soviet onslaught against Trotskyists in Spain.

4. By concealing from his followers the truth about his own conspiracies, Leon Trotsky put them in grave peril.

Andres Nin, Erwin Wolf, and Kurt Landau believed Trotsky's repeated assertions that he was innocent of the charges made against him at the Moscow Trials. Their activities in Spain all but guaranteed their assassinations of at the hands of the communists, who regarded them as fascist collaborators because they believed that Trotsky was.

The German role in the May Days revolt

Between 1939 and 1941 Pavel Sudoplatov was assistant director of Soviet Foreign Intelligence – the First (Intelligence) Directorate of the NKVD of the USSR. Sometime in 1939 Lavrentii Beria, People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, put Sudoplatov in charge of "Operatsia Utka," the assassination of Leon Trotsky.[2] In his memoir, *The Intelligence Service and the Kremlin*, Sudoplatov states the following:

> In the interests of the political situation the activities of Trotsky and his supporters abroad in the 1930s are said to have been propaganda only. But

[1] The discovery of Trotsky's lies began with the article by Pierre Broué (Broué, Pierre 1980). During the '80s and '90s Broué published more accounts of Trotsky's lies. In 1986 American scholar Arch Getty revealed yet more lies of Trotsky's (Getty, J. Arch. 1986). Broué and Getty based their research on discoveries in the Harvard Trotsky Archive, opened to scholars on January 2, 1980. Broué's, Getty's, and my own discoveries of Trotsky's lies are discussed in Furr, Grover. 2015, Chapters 12-16.

[2] "Operatsia 'Utka'" literally means "Operation 'Duck'." "Utka" was apparently an acronym for the Russian words "ustranenie Trotskogo," "removal of Trotsky." The best discussion of this operation I have found is in Vishliov, Oleg, 2001, 123-140. "Utka" is deciphered on 127-128.

> this is not so. **The Trotskyists were also involved in actions. Making use of the support of persons with ties to German military intelligence** [the 'Abwehr'] **they organized a revolt against the Republican government in Barcelona in 1937. From Trotskyist circles** in the French and German special intelligence services came "indicative" information concerning the actions of the Communist Parties in supporting the Soviet Union. **Concerning the connections of the leaders of the Trotskyist revolt in Barcelona in 1937 we were informed by Schulze-Boysen**… Afterward, after his arrest, the Gestapo accused him of transmitting this information to us, and this fact figured in his death sentence by the Hitlerite court in his case. (Sudoplatov, Pavel. 1997, 58)

The actual text of the German *Reichskriegsgericht* (Military Court of the Reich) against Harro Schulze-Boysen has been published. Schulze-Boysen was a *Luftwaffe* officer and member of the "Red Orchestra" (*Rote Kapelle*) group of anti-Nazi spies that funneled intelligence to the Soviets during World War 2.[3] In December 1942 he and his wife Libertas were convicted of espionage for the Soviet Union and executed. The relevant paragraph reads thus:

> Anfang 1938, während des Spanienkrieges, erfuhr der Angeklagte dienstlich, daß **unter Mitwirkung des deutschen Geheimdienstes im Gebiet von Barcelona ein Aufstand gegen die dortige rote Regierung vorbereitet werde.** Diese Nachricht wurde von ihm gemeinsam mit der von Pöllnitz der sowjetrussischen Botschaft in Paris zugeleitet.
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> At the beginning of 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, the accused learned in his official capacity that **a rebellion against the local red government in the territory of Barcelona was being prepared with the co-operation of the German Secret Service.** This information, together with that of von Pöllnitz, was transmitted by him to the Soviet Russian embassy in Paris. (Haase, Norbert. 1993, 105)

"Pöllnitz" was Gisella von Pöllnitz, a recent recruit to the "Red Orchestra" anti-Nazi Soviet spy ring, who worked for United Press and who passed the report to the Soviet embassy." The German court got a few things wrong: the year was 1937, not 1938, and the Soviet embassy was that in Berlin, not in Paris, as Pöllnitz was arrested by the Gestapo. She was soon released. (Brysac, Shareen Blair. 2000, 237)

By the time he wrote his memoirs in the 1990s Sudoplatov regretted many of the things he had done in the Soviet secret service. Yet he still insisted that the Trotskyists were involved with the Nazis in the May Days revolt of 1937 in Barcelona.

The information from the German Military Court provides independent confirmation of Sudoplatov's statement and confirms Communist suspicions that German intelligence

[3] See https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rote_Kapelle The French Wikipedia page is also relatively full; the English page is skimpy. A classic account is Perrault, Gilles.1969.

was involved in planning the Barcelona revolt of May 1937. According to General Wilhelm Faupel, German ambassador to Spain, Franco himself claimed that agents of his were also involved in instigating this revolt.

> As for the disorders in Barcelona, Franco informed me that the street fighting had been started by his agents. As Nicolás Franco further told me, they had in all some 13 agents in Barcelona. … the agent had succeeded, within a few days of receiving such instructions, in having street shooting started by three or four persons, and this had then produced the desired result. (DGFP. 1951. No. 254, 286)

The Barcelona May Days revolt was an uprising against the Republican government during wartime by anti-Soviet anarchists and socialists including the pro-Trotsky POUM (United Marxist Workers Party). Faupel's report and the German Military Court document show that Franco and his German allies naturally regarded this revolt as very favorable to themselves.

The Trotskyist Role in the May Days Revolt

At the time of the Second Moscow Trial of the "Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center" that took place in Moscow from January 23 to January 30, 1937, Hitler's Germany was massively supporting Franco's forces against the Spanish Republic, while the USSR was the only significant supporter of the Republic itself. During the trial the Spanish Civil War was directly referred to twice. At the January 28 evening session in the course of his summation Andrei Vyshinsky mentioned Stalin's stirring message to José Diaz, Chairman of the Spanish Communist Party, in which Stalin characterized the Spanish Republic's cause as "the common cause of the whole of advanced and progressive humanity." (Report. 1937, 508-9; Protsess. 1937, 206)

Karl Radek, one of the most prominent Trotskyist defendants, appealed directly to "the Trotskyite elements" in other countries, naming Spain:

> [W]e must say to the Trotskyite elements in France, Spain and other countries — and there are such — that the experience of the Russian revolution has shown that Trotskyism is a wrecker of the labour movement. We must warn them that if they do not learn from our experience, they will pay for it with their heads. (Report. 1937, 550; Protsess. 1937, 231)

At the February-March 1937 Central Committee Plenum in Moscow, Stalin made two speeches. In the first of them Stalin expressed intense hostility to Trotsky and his followers, as might be expected.

> The restoration of capitalism, the liquidation of the collective farms and state farms, the restoration of the system of exploitation, an alliance with the fascist forces of Germany and Japan to bring war against the Soviet

> Union nearer, a struggle for war and against the policy of peace, the territorial dismemberment of the Soviet Union, giving the Ukraine to the Germans and the maritime provinces to the Japanese, the preparation of the military defeat of the Soviet Union if enemy states should attack it, and, as a means of achieving these tasks, wrecking, diversion, individual terrorism against the leaders of the Soviet government, espionage for the benefit of the Japanese and German fascist forces -- such was the political platform of present day Trotskyism which was set forth by Piatakov, Radek and Sokolnikov. (Stalin, J.V. 1937, 17)

Stalin and the Soviet leadership considered Trotsky's collaboration with Germany and Japan to be a proven fact and acted accordingly. Thanks to the release of documents from former Soviet archives, we now possess a lot of evidence that Trotsky was indeed conspiring with the Germans and Japanese. (Furr, Grover. 2017)

In a speech on March 3, 1937 to the Central Committee Plenum Stalin specifically mentioned Trotsky's new Fourth International as a continuing threat:

> Take, for example, the Trotskyite counter-revolutionary Fourth International, two-thirds of which is made up of spies and subversive agents. Isn't this a reserve? Is it not clear that this international of spies will select forces to do the spying and wrecking work of the Trotskyites? (Stalin, J.V. 1937, 34)

Emphasizing the grave damage that a small number of spies and saboteurs, even without a base in the working class, could do, Stalin nonetheless called for "an individual, differentiated approach" in dealing with persons who had had Trotskyist sympathies in the past.

> But here is the question -- how to carry out in practice the task of smashing and uprooting the German-Japanese agents of Trotskyism. Does this mean that we should strike and uproot not only the real Trotskyites, but also those who wavered at some time toward Trotskyism, and then long ago came away from Trotskyism; not only those who are really Trotskyite agents for wrecking, but also those who happened once upon a time to go along a street where some Trotskyite or other had once passed? At any rate, such voices were heard here at the plenum. Can we consider such an interpretation of the resolution to be correct? No, we cannot consider it to be correct.
>
> On this question, as on all other questions, **there must be an individual, differentiated approach.** You must not measure everyone with the same yardstick. Such a sweeping approach can only harm the cause of struggle against the real Trotskyite wreckers and spies. (Stalin, J.V. 1937, 44-45)

Stalin went on to minimize the significance of Trotskyists as a force:

> … [I]f, in spite of this, the Trotskyite wreckers nevertheless have some reserves or other around our Party, **it is because the incorrect policy of some of our comrades on the question of expulsion from the Party and reinstatement of expelled people**, the heartless attitude of some of our comrades toward the fate of individual Party members and individual Party workers, artificially engender a number of discontented and embittered people, and thus create these reserves for the Trotskyites. (Stalin, J.V. 1937, 60-61)

In early March, 1937, Stalin was speaking up strongly against any kind of "witch hunt" atmosphere against Trotskyists while at the same time warning his audience about the danger of Trotskyists as spies and saboteurs — a danger reinforced by the defendants' testimony at the January 1937 trial.

A few months later this had all changed dramatically under the impact of two sets of events that Stalin and the Soviet leadership saw as linked both to one another and to the conspiracies admitted by January 1937 trial defendants. The first of these was the May Days revolt in Barcelona. The Soviets had learned that agents of Franco, Hitler, and Trotsky were deeply implicated in it.

The second was the "Tukhachevsky Affair." This was the investigation, arrest, interrogation, trial, and execution of eight top-ranking Soviet military commanders who confessed to conspiracy against the Soviet Union in alliance with Hitler's Germany and with Trotsky.

The Barcelona May Days Revolt

In early May, 1937, an armed revolt against the Catalonian republican government broke out, led by anarchists and by the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*). The POUM is briefly and accurately described by John Costello and Oleg Tsarev:

> …the revolutionary Catalonian group of Marxists who had declared war on Stalin, accusing the Soviet dictator of betraying the Revolution by establishing "the bureaucratic regime of a poisoned traitor." Urged on by their leader Andrés Nin, the radical Spanish Marxists invited Trotsky to live in Barcelona, proclaiming the need to bring down the "bourgeois democracy" of the Communist-backed Popular Front administration of the Spanish Republic. (CTs. 1993, 280)[4]

One of the leaders of the POUM was Andres Nin, a former secretary of Trotsky's.[5] Nin had publicly "capitulated" -- broken with Trotsky. But the Soviets would have been foolish to simply believe that this apparent break was sincere or complete. The late Pierre

[4] The phrases "the bureaucratic regime of a poisoned traitor" and "bourgeois democracy" are taken from Thomas, Hugh. 1961, 382, who cites the POUM newspaper *The Spanish Revolution* of February 3, 1937.
[5] "Secretary" here means "member of the secretariat," i.e. close political assistant.

Broué, the most prominent Trotskyist historian of his day, pointed out that Nin himself considered the "capitulations" of all other Trotskyists to be false. Broué wrote:

> Lev Sedov called the Smirnov group either the "former capitulators" or the "Trotskyite capitulators." **Everybody had known, from 1929 on, that people in the Smirnov group had not really capitulated but were trying to fool the apparatus, and were capable of organizing themselves as an Opposition within the party: the fact was so universally known that Andrés Nin, the Spaniard deported from the Soviet Union in August 1930, explained it openly to his German comrades of *Die permanente Revolution* who printed his declaration without apparent problem**. (Broué, Pierre. 1990, 104)[6]

American researcher Arch Getty found the documentary evidence, in the Harvard Trotsky Archive, that Trotsky's loudly-proclaimed breaks with Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Sokol'nikov, and Preobrazhensky were ploys to disguise continued secret conspiracy with them. The Soviets would naturally have suspected that Nin's break with Trotsky too was a cover for continued collaboration.

The POUM and Trotsky

The POUM was not technically a Trotskyist party. But it was associated closely enough with Trotsky and Trotskyists that many would deem it such.

* The POUM had been formed from a Trotskyist group and the "Bloc Obrer i Camperol" affiliated with the Right opposition.

* The POUM newspaper *La Batalla* condemned the first Moscow Trial of August 1936:

> We are revolutionary socialists, Marxists. In the name of socialism and the revolutionary working class, we protest against the monstrous crime that has just been perpetrated in Moscow.

The description of the first Moscow trial as "the monstrous crime" signaled that the POUM leaders took their analysis directly from Trotsky.

* *La Batalla* also praised Trotsky alongside Lenin, pointedly ignoring Stalin.

> Trotsky is for us, along with Lenin, one of the great figures of the October revolution and a great revolutionary socialist writer. Insulted, persecuted, we express our solidarity with him, without hiding, at the same time, our disagreement with some of his opinions. (AS. 1988, 132)

[6] In a subsequent article Broué corrected the journal reference where Nin made this revelation: it was "Die Lage der russischen Arbeiterklasse," *Der Kommunist* 12 (beginning of November) 1930. See Broué, Pierre. 1997, 44.

* At Nin's urging the POUM voted to invite Trotsky to come live in Spain. According to Alba and Schwartz:

> As early as August [1936] he [Nin] had proposed to the P.O.U.M. executive that, since Trotsky was in exile in Norway and had nowhere else to go, having been rejected by many countries, the P.O.U.M. should suggest to the Generalitat that he be offered asylum in Catalunya. … [T]he executive accepted the suggestion… (166)[7]

* While living in the USSR Nin had been a supporter of Trotsky's and member of the Left Opposition. After returning to Spain Nin had been the key figure in the formation of the Spanish Trotskyist group, the *Izquierda Comunista de España*.

* The POUM's "self-defense" group killed the Soviet agent Narvich. (AS. 1988, 234.) [8]

These facts may be found in Alba and Schwartz's book *Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism. A History of the P.O.U.M.* This is a very anti-Stalin work in which the authors take pains to criticize the communists and Soviets at every turn, and insist on the "non-Trotskyist" nature of the POUM.

But POUM was "non-Trotskyist" in a formal sense only. If one can imagine a party such as described above and then substitute "Stalin" for "Trotsky", one can see that these are the kinds of characteristics that would have qualified a non-communist Party as being "Stalinist" or a "Communist front." In the same way, the POUM could be characterized as "Trotskyist" or a "Trotskyist front."

According to Broué, Trotsky's supporters reported to him in 1936 that most POUM "militants" in Barcelona were in fact Trotskyists. (Broué, Pierre. 1982, 77) No wonder, then, that Trotsky dispatched Erwin Wolf as his emissary to Spain.

Another reason for associating the POUM with Trotsky was its involvement in the Barcelona May Days in 1937. This revolt against the Republic during its war against the fascists was exactly what the Trotskyist defendants in the second Moscow Trial of January 1937 had admitted that they, together with the Germans and under Trotsky's leadership, had been planning in the event of an invasion of the USSR.

> Pyatakov: About the end of 1935 Radek received a long letter-instructions from Trotsky… the question of defeatism, of military wrecking activities, of inflicting telling blows during wartime both to the rear and to the army was here put pointblank…

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[7] According to French Trotskyist René Dazy, Nin made this proposal to the Catalonian government (Generalitat) on December 7 1936: "Le 7 décembre 1936, Andrèu Nin proposa en conseil des ministers de Catalogne d'accorder l'asile politique à Trotski." Dazy, René. 1981, 177.

[8] According to Landau's biographer Hans Schafranek, POUM leader Julián Gorkin admitted in 1983 that he had given the order for Narvich to be killed. See Schafranek, Hans. 1988, 502 and 547 n. 400.

> In the event of military attack the destructive forces of the Trotskyite organizations which would act within the country must be co-ordinated with the forces from without acting under the guidance of German fascism. **The diversive and wrecking activity which is being conducted by the Trotskyite-Zinovievite organization within the Soviet Union must be carried out under the instructions of Trotsky, which are to be agreed upon with the German General Staff.** (Report. 1937, 55-6; 65)

We now know that German and Francoist agents were involved in instigating the May Days revolt along with the POUM and others. The Soviets and the Spanish communists knew it then.

What Were Leading Trotskyists Doing in Spain?

A number of prominent Trotskyists went to Spain, including Erwin Wolf and Kurt Landau. Paul Preston is a contemporary and objective historian of the Spanish Civil War. Preston's account of Wolf's and Landau's disappearances is as follows:

> In September 1937, Orlov managed to eliminate Erwin Wolff, who had become Trotsky's secretary in Norway. In 1936, Wolff played a key role in refuting the accusations made at the Moscow Trials and was a central figure in the International Secretariat which was the predecessor to the Fourth International [Trotsky's organization]. He came to Spain to work with Grandino Munis's Bolshevik-Leninist group. In Barcelona, he was arrested for subversive activity on 27 July 1937, released on the following day but immediately rearrested. He was officially released on 13 September but was never seen again.
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> Another prominent Trotskyist who disappeared ten days later was the Austrian Kurt Landau. A one-time collaborator of Trotsky, Landau had a long history of anti-Stalinist militancy in Austria, Germany, France and Spain. … In Spain, he worked closely with Andreu Nin and conducted liaison between the POUM and foreign journalists and writers … He had outraged the Soviets with his pamphlet *Spain 1936, Germany 1918*, published in December 1936, which compared the crushing of the revolutionary workers of Germany by the Freikorps in 1918 to Stalinist hostility to the CNT and the POUM in Spain. In consequence, he had been smeared by Soviet propaganda as 'the leader of a band of terrorists' and the liaison agent between the Gestapo and the POUM. Kurt Landau managed to remain at liberty until 23 September 1937 when he was abducted by Soviet agents from his hiding place. Like Rein[9] and Wolff he was never seen again. (Preston, Paul. 2012, 418-419)

[9] "Rein" was Mark Rein, son of a prominent anti-Bolshevik Menshevik. Rein "had come to Spain as correspondent for several anti-Stalinist publications including the New York Jewish daily Forward. On 9 April 1937, he left the hotel Continental in Barcelona and was never seen again." (Preston, Paul. 2012, 407)

Landau had publicly broken with Trotsky. But Nin had written that such declarations by former Oppositionists were phony. During the Moscow Trials Radek, Piatakov, Khristian Rakovsky, and others confirmed this. The Soviets would have considered Landau's public break with Trotsky to be phony as well.

Landau's writings show that he had remained under the strong influence of Trotsky's ideas and writings ideologically and politically.[10] Landau's biographer Hans Schafranek shows that Landau went to Spain to support Trotskyist and other similar forces, mainly the POUM, in an attempt to make a revolution against the Republican government. Erwin Wolf went to Spain as the emissary of the International Secretariat of the IV International, Trotsky's organization, and therefore as Trotsky's own emissary. Wolf and Landau knew that the Soviets considered Trotsky a fascist collaborator and therefore would regard them in the same light.

Prior Knowledge of the Planned Revolt

Costello and Tsarev (CTs. 1993) had privileged access to the reports sent to Moscow by Alexander Orlov, the chief of the Soviet NKVD in the Spanish Republic.[11] Costello and Tsarev summarize a part of one of Orlov's reports as follows:

> Orlov's agents had already penetrated the leadership of the Federation of Spanish Anarchists and the POUM. His plants reported back to NKVD headquarters on **the preparations the two groups were making for an armed insurrection**. This was nothing new or surprising to Orlov … After a visit to Barcelona he reported to Moscow in December 1936 "that **a militant uprising is being prepared by Trotskyists (POUM) in Barcelona for the beginning of January** for the purpose of active penetration into the exposed Fascist organization at the Hispano Suiza plant." (CTs. 1993, 281)

In a report dated February 22, 1937, Orlov wrote:

> For some time there has been an association between POUM and the Federation of Spanish Anarchists taking shape **which is directed at anti-Soviet activity associated with the latest Trotskyist trial**. (CTs. 1993, 469 n. 41).

Rein was a dedicated anticommunist. His murder, though, was separate from the fate of the three Trotskyists Wolf, Landau, and Nin.

[10] At least one document in the Harvard Trotsky Archive proves that Landau remained in written communication with Trotsky as late as 1936-1937.

[11] These files were subsequently reclassified, so Costello and Tsarev's is the only account we have of the contents of Orlov's reports. We can check what Costello and Tsarev quoted from other files. The Volkogonov Archive in the Library of Congress contains photocopies of the originals of some of Mark Zborowski's reports to his NKVD handlers about Leon Sedov. The texts of those documents in Costello and Tsarev's book correspond exactly with these originals. It is reasonable to assume that they also copied accurately from other Soviet files.

This is a reference to the Second Moscow Trial of January, 1937, in which Karl Radek had warned the Trotskyists in Spain to stand down. Costello and Tsarev link this planned uprising with the one reported by Schulze-Boysen:

> This was the same insurrection independently reported to the Centre by the Soviet embassy in Berlin after receiving an anonymous tip-off from their agent Harro Schulze-Boysen. From contacts on the *Luftwaffe* General Staff he revealed that **German agents had also infiltrated Trotskyists circles in Barcelona with the intention of encouraging their *putsch*.** (CTs. 1993, 281)

In a report to Moscow dated March, 1937 Orlov specifies NKVD intelligence concerning some of the anticommunist activity being planned by the POUM:

> At present a number of people for terrorist work have been confirmed by the Committee [Central Committee of POUM]. The control of the POUM youth organization has been assigned to first Tedor Sans, second Mendez, third another head of the organization called Lorenzo. **All these are experienced in terrorist activity** and have participated in various armed raids. … **It was established that Blanco's group [a member of the directorate of the POUM youth organization] was preparing a terrorist act against the former Komsomol [Communist youth organization] secretary of the town of Cordova, Ramon Gorrero**, and failed to accomplish it only because Blanco was killed at the front. (CTs. 1993, 469 n.42)

When the revolt finally broke out in May 1937 Orlov reported to Moscow that it had been long in the planning.

> "**It has long been known that FAP [Fascists Anarchists POUMists] are preparing for a *putsch* in Catalonia** by provoking it using a variety of means." (CTs. 1993, 281)

The Spanish communists and Soviet NKVD would certainly have interpreted the presence of leading Trotskyists like Wolf and Landau as additional evidence that the May Days uprising had been planned in advance and that Trotskyists were in on the planning.[12]

Andrés Nin

Nin and Trotsky had exchanged sharp words over Nin's strategy as a founder and leader of the POUM. But so had Trotsky and Radek, among others, and Nin had claimed in 1930 that such a public falling out was a cover for continued collaboration. Nin remained

[12] It is significant that neither Wolff nor Landau was arrested and "disappeared" until *after* the May Days uprising.

loyal to Trotsky's interpretation of the Soviet Union, Stalin, the Soviet role in Spain, and loyal to Trotsky personally as well. The Soviets would have naturally assumed that Nin was still a Trotskyist agent.

According to Preston, Nin and other members of the POUM executive were arrested on June 16, 1937 in Barcelona. Nin was interrogated four times but did not make any confession to conspiracy with the fascists. Preston believes that Nin was not tortured. When Nin refused to confess and so was useless for a trial Alexander Orlov, head of the NKVD in Spain, decided to kill him. He was shot, evidently on July 24. (Preston, Paul. 2012, 417; CTs. 1993, 291, 470)

The Tukhachevsky Affair

After the May Days revolt but before the arrest and subsequent assassination of Nin came the "Tukhachevsky Affair" in the USSR. Marshal Tukhachevsky and other high-ranking officers admitted to plotting with the Germans to instigate a civil war within the USSR on the event of a German attack. Tukhachevsky also confessed to giving Red Army operational plans to the Germans.

At the same time as Tukhachevsky and others were confessing, both Genrikh Iagoda, former head of the NKVD and Nikolai Bukharin confessed to similar involvement with Trotsky in conspiring to overthrow the Soviet government.[13] They also admitted to conspiring with the Germans to instigate a civil war within the USSR[14] — essentially what the rebels had actually done in the May Days revolt.

It was logical for the Soviets to assume that the POUM were Trotskyists not only in their support for Trotsky and opposition to the communists (= "Stalinists", to them), but also in their determination to stab the Republic in the back during wartime just as the Trotskyists, military figures, and Rightists like Bukharin had admitted they were planning to do within the Soviet Union.

At an enlarged session of the Military Soviet, held on June 1-4 to discuss the Tukhachevsky conspiracy, Stalin stated that Tukhachevsky and the rest had "tried to make out of the USSR another Spain."[15] Stalin was referring to Piatakov's and Radek's descriptions of Trotsky's plan to sabotage the Red Army in the event of an invasion by one or more imperialist powers. He meant: create a civil war -- do what the POUM, the Trotskyists and others had done in the May Days in Barcelona. The Barcelona revolt appeared to be exactly the kind of "stab in the back" in wartime that the 1937 Trial defendants had confessed to planning, at Trotsky's behest, against the USSR in case of war with Germany and/or Japan.

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[13] Iagoda's confessions about Trotsky are in Iagoda, Genrikh S. 1997. Bukharin's confession is discussed later in the present essay.

[14] I use the word "conspiring" here because Bukharin claimed that he never actually met with Trotsky or Germans, but insisted that he was involved with others who did.

[15] J.V. Stalin. 1996 [1937], 115. Original in Khaustov et al., eds, 2004, 206; Stalin, *Sochineniia* [Collected Works], vol. 14, at http://www.hrono.ru/libris/stalin/14-5.html

Today we have a large amount of evidence that Tukhachevsky and the other military leaders tried, convicted, and executed with him were indeed guilty. On June 1, 1937 Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky wrote out by hand a lengthy statement in which he admitted to conspiring against the Soviet Union with the German General Staff. Tukhachevsky stated that the commanders discussed their planned revolt with Trotsky.

> In 1932, on more than one occasion, I ta1ked to Feld'man, criticizing the army's leadership and the policies of the Party. Feld'man expressed great misgivings about the policies of the Party in relation to the countryside. I told him that this should warn us, military workers, to be on our guard and suggested to him to organize a military group, sharing the views of the Rightists, which would be able to discuss these matters and take the necessary steps.
>
> Feld'man agreed **and thus was begun the creation of the anti-Soviet military Trotskyist conspiracy**. I told Feld'man that I already had established links with Enukidze, who represented the leadership of the Rightists.
>
> Upon the return from the Far East of Putna and Gorbachev – I think this was in 1933 -- I had talked separately with them both. **Putna quickly admitted that he was already in contact with Trotsky and with Smirnov. I suggested to him to join the ranks of the military-Trotskyite conspiracy, telling him that I had direct instructions of Trotsky.** Putna immediately agreed. Later, following his appointment as military attaché, he was asked **to maintain the link between Trotsky and the center of the anti-Soviet military-Trotskyite conspiracy.**
>
> If I am not mistaken, also around about this time, **I talked to Smirnov, I.N[16]., who told me that he, by order of Trotsky, was attempting to disorganize the preparations for the mobilization of industry in the area of shells.**
>
> Round about this time, 1933/1934, Romm visited me in Moscow and told me that **he had to pass on Trotsky's new instructions. Trotsky pointed out that it was no longer feasible to restrict our activities to imply recruiting and organizing cadres, … that German Fascism would render the Trotskyists assistance** in their struggle with Stalin's leadership and **that the military conspiracy must supply the German General Staff with intelligence data, as well as working hand in glove with the Japanese General Staff,** carrying out disruptive activities in the army, prepare diversions and terrorist acts against members of the government. **These instructions of Trotsky** I communicated to the center of our conspiracy.
>
> I recruited Eideman in 1932. **On receiving instructions from Trotsky about wrecking activities, spying diversionary activities**, Eideman asked that he be given instructions about his activity in Osoaviakhim.

[16] Trotsky and Sedov identified Ivan Nikitich Smirnov as the leader of the clandestine Trotskyists inside the USSR (Broué, Pierre. 1980; Broué, Pierre. 1997).

During the winter of 1935/1936, Pyatakov told me that **Trotsky had now asked us to ensure the [future] defeat of the USSR in war,** even if this meant giving the Ukraine to the Germans and the Primor'ye to the Japanese… Pyatakov stated that **Trotsky would carry out a decisive struggle to plant his people in the Comintern**. Pyatakov stated that such conditions would mean the restoration of capitalism in the country.

As we received **Trotsky's instructions on unleashing a campaign of sabotage activity, espionage, diversionary and terrorist activity**, the center of the conspiracy …. issued various instructions to the members of the conspiracy, **based on Trotsky's directives**.

The center of **the anti-Soviet military Trotskyite conspiracy** carried out all its wrecking activity and diversionary work exclusively according to a chain of command, within the existing organs of administration within the RKKA…

Yakir put forward the question about whether, or not, it was not more correct **for the center of the anti-Soviet military Trotskyite** center to unite with the Rightists or the Trotskyists.

In the autumn of 1935, Putna came to my office and **handed over a note from Sedov, in Trotsky's name, insisting that I more energetically attract Trotskyite cadres to the military conspiracy**… In addition, Putna told me that **Trotsky had established direct links with Hitler's government and the General Staff,** and that the **center of the anti-Soviet military Trotskyite conspiracy should task itself to prepare defeats on those fronts where the German Army would operate.**

At the end of January 1936 I had to travel to London to attend the funeral of the British King. During the funeral procession, first by foot and then on the train, General Rundstedt – the head of the German government's military delegation – spoke to me. **It was obvious that the German General Staff had already been informed by Trotsky.**

As I have already pointed out in the first section, during the strategic military exercises carried out in April 1936, on the question of the operational position of our armies, I exchanged opinions with Yakir and Uborevich. **Taking into account Trotsky's directive to prepare for defeat on that front where the Germans would attack** … I proposed to Yakir to make the German task easier by diversionary-wrecking tactics…[17]

[17] The only published confessions of Tukhachevsky are in *Molodaia Gvardiia* 9 (1994), 129-135 and 10 (1994), 255-266. They are online, as one text, at the very useful Russian "Historical Materials" site http://istmat.info/node/28950 For the reader's convenience I have cited the partial English translation in Main, Steven. 1997. The first part of Tukhachevsky's confessions are dated June 1, 1937; the second part have no date, at least in the published version, but may have come one or several days later.

Neither Main nor anyone else has any evidence that Tukhachevsky's confessions were not genuine. But it is not acceptable, not "politically correct," to use these confessions as evidence because a real German and Trotskyist conspiracy, moreover one that included the Tukhachevsky Affair defendants, would threaten to dismantle the "anti-Stalin paradigm," the false notion that Stalin "framed" all the defendants. This paradigm is virtually sacrosanct in Trotskyist and anticommunist historiography.

Nikolai Bukharin's Confession Accusing Trotsky

On June 2, 1937, one day after Tukhachevsky made these admissions, Nikolai Bukharin, who had been imprisoned since the end of February 1937, also confessed to knowledge of Trotsky's work with the Germans.

> I spoke with PYATAKOV and TOMSKY and RYKOV with SOKOL'NIKOV AND KAMENEV. I had a conversation with PYATAKOV in the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry (approximately the summer of 1932). It began with an **exchange of opinions concerning the overall position in the country. PYATAKOV informed me about his meeting in Berlin with SEDOV about the fact that TROTSKY was insisting on a transition to terrorist methods of struggle against the Stalin leadership** and on the necessity of consolidating all anti-Soviet forces in the struggle for the overthrow of the "Stalinist bureaucracy."… PYATAKOV hinted at terror but was very skeptical about this method of struggle, considering it to be a specific outgrowth of Trotsky's fury and bitterness, with little political rationale ...
>
> In the summer of 1934 I was at RADEK'S apartment when **RADEK informed me about Trotsky's international-political directives. RADEK said that Trotsky, insisting on terror, all the same considered that the basic chance of the bloc's coming to power was the defeat of the USSR in the war with German and Japan, and in this connection set forth the idea of an agreement with German and Japan at the cost of territorial concessions (the Ukraine to the Germans, the Far East to the Japanese).** I did not protest against the idea of an agreement with Germany and Japan, but did not agree with Trotsky as far as the nature and extent of the concessions ... I insisted that Trotsky's impetuousness could lead to completely compromising his organizations, and so the organizations of all Trotsky's allies, including the Rights …
>
> In the summer of 1935 I was sitting on the veranda at Radek's dacha when all of a sudden three Germans drove up in a car. RADEK recommended me to them as German fascist professors … Afterwards RADEK told me that one of the Germans was BAUM, and that he had had dealings with him before, **on instructions from Trotsky, that he, RADEK, had informed BAUM about the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc and about the Rights**, but that he did not want to converse with BAUM in the presence of other persons …

> I remember one more important conversation in which RADEK hinted that he had received some sort of new directives from Trotsky concerning both internal and foreign politics. **I remember that I was upset in general by way Trotsky issued orders of various kinds, to which the Trotskyites related as though they were the military commands of a general. RADEK hinted to me that it was a question of some kind of new negotiations of Trotsky's with Germany or England**, but limited himself to telling about Trotsky's directives about sabotage….
>
> Besides these … conversations there were shorter and more accidental meetings where we briefly exchanged views. From these the most important examples were the following:
>
> 1. **RADEK informed me that TROTSKY was always insisting on terror** ...[18]

We can be reasonably sure that Bukharin was telling the truth. Bukharin spent most of his testimony during the March 1938 Third Moscow Trial denying certain accusations leveled at him by the prosecution – something he would never have done if, for example, his family had been threatened. Yet Bukharin affirmed his participation in the Right-Trotskyist bloc and the confessions outlined above. Stephen F. Cohen, a world authority on and champion of Bukharin, wrote in 2003 that Bukharin was *not* tortured.[19]

We now possess a great deal of evidence confirming the reality of the military- Trotskyist conspiracy, including its collusion with the German General Staff. To take two examples:

* In 2012 Vladimir Bobrov and I published Marshal Semion Budyonny's letter to Marshal Voroshilov of June 26, 1937. In it Budyonny, one of the panel of judges at the trial of Tukhachevsky and the seven other commanders on June 11, 1937, outlined the confessions at the trial, including the defendants' admissions to collaboration with Trotsky and the Germans. (FB. 2012)

* In May, 2018, Russian authorities declassified the 172-page official transcript of the Tukhachevsky Trial. In their testimony all of the defendants confess their guilt. Among many other things, Vitalii Primakov, one of the defendants, confessed that Trotsky had assigned him, Primakov, to raise an armed uprising in Leningrad in the event of war. Tukhachevsky and Vitovt Putna confessed to being allied in their conspiracy with the Nazis and with Trotsky.[20]

The accused implicated Trotsky many times during their testimony. They confirmed the existence of the bloc of oppositionists, including the Trotskyists. We know that this bloc existed from Trotsky's and Sedov's own letters, found in the Harvard Trotsky Archive by Pierre Broué and his team of researchers. (Broué, Pierre. 1980)

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[18] Bukharin, Nikolai I. 1937. For an edition and scholarly examination of Bukharin's first confession see FB. 2007.
[19] Koen, Stiven. 2003, 60-61. For a detailed discussion see BF. 2010.
[20] More discussion of Budyonny's letter may be found in chapter nine of Furr, Grover. 2015.

The Moscow Trials Were Not "Frame-ups"

The POUM repeated Trotsky's line that the Moscow Trials were frame-ups of innocent men. Trotsky claimed that the defendants at the Moscow Trials, Tukhachevsky, and Bukharin were tortured, their confessions fabricated and false. This line was picked up by Khrushchev, Gorbachev, and Cold War anticommunists, who repeat it to this day.

But there never has been any *evidence* to support this view. On the contrary: we now have a great deal of evidence that corroborates the Moscow Trials testimony, including the discovery that Trotsky lied about them. This evidence shows that the defendants at the Moscow Trials testified what they chose to testify and were not "forced" by the NKVD or prosecution.[21] Therefore there are no *rational* grounds not to accept the confessions of the defendants at these trials as evidence. The only grounds for rejecting them are political bias.

Viewed in its historical context, the sudden and unexpected Soviet and Communist campaign against Trotskyists makes sense. Sudoplatov's account shows that the Soviets had evidence of Trotskyist and German involvement in the instigation of the "Barcelona May Days" revolt. Faupel's letter shows that the German ambassador believed that Franco's agents were also involved. The statement of the German Military Court shows that the German secret service was involved in instigating the revolt and that the communists learned of this through the bold actions of communist agents von Pöllnitz and Schulze-Boysen.

The POUM acted like a Trotskyist party. The rebels appeared to be doing precisely what the Trotskyists had confessed that they had long been planning to do in the USSR: revolt against the government in wartime so as to guarantee its defeat. The Trotskyist defendants had said Trotsky had some kind of understanding with the Germans (as well as with the Japanese). And we now conclusive evidence confirming Trotsky's collaboration with the Germans and Japanese.

This is the context in which the kidnapping, interrogation, and murder of Nin took place. It is logical to assume that the NKVD and Spanish communists kidnapped Nin to find out what he knew about Nazi / Francoist / POUM collaboration, and whether this had been due to Nazi infiltration or whether it was part of Trotsky's own collaboration with German intelligence.

Erwin Wolf

One of Leon Trotsky's closest and most trusted aides, Erwin Wolf came to Spain directly from Trotsky, who had moved to Norway. Georges Vereeken says that Wolf was going to Spain not to fight but as a representative of the "International Secretariat," Trotsky's political movement. (Vereeken, Georges. 1976, 171). Wolf was Trotsky's liaison to the

[21] In Furr, Grover. 2015 and Furr, Grover. 2018 I have carefully verified those statements in Moscow Trials confessions that can be independently checked.

Trotskyists in Spain, including to Andres Nin with whom he worked closely. Boris Volodarsky writes:

> In the second half of July [1937], shortly after the arrest of the POUM leadership, Moulin (Hans Freund) set up as meeting in which he invited several prominent Trotskyists who were still at large … Those present at the meeting were **Erwin Wolf, who was in Spain under his own name, posing as a foreign correspondent for several British newspapers,** Wolf's wife, and a Spaniard whom Thalmann [Paul Thalmann, a Swiss Trotskyist] calls 'Munez' in his memoirs, 'a real leader of the Spanish Trotskyists.'[22] This was quite certainly Grandiso Munis. **The agenda of the urgent meeting was to discuss the political situation and chances for a revolutionary uprising after the May Days** and following arrests. (Volodarsky, Boris. 2015, 263-4)

After Wolf and his wife were arrested trying to leave Spain they were detained in two different places. According to Volodarsky, Thalmann noted that when he himself was arrested "his investigators always ask[ed] the same questions: when was he last in Germany? When did he meet Trotsky in Norway? Where was the Trotskyite Moulin?" (Volodarsky, Boris. 2015, 265)

Released, rearrested, released again, rearrested again, Wolf was ultimately released by the Spanish police on September 13, 1937, and immediately abducted, Boris Volodarsky assumes, by persons who were acting for "Moscow," i.e. the NKVD in Spain under the command of Alexander Orlov. (266)

Kurt Landau

In April 1930 Landau had been one of the founding members of Trotsky's "International Bureau." According to his wife Katia, Landau believed Trotsky's version of the 1936 Moscow Trial, as she did. Thanks to Pierre Broué's discovery in the Harvard Trotsky Archive we know that Trotsky was lying. Trotsky and his Soviet-based supporters had indeed been in a clandestine political "bloc" with Zinovievists, Rights, and other oppositionists. (Broué, Pierre. 1980)

Landau had supposedly broken with Trotsky in 1931. But his determination to defend the defendants of the 1936 Moscow Trial is what one would expect of a Trotskyist. The Soviets would have suspected that Landau and Trotsky had staged a phony falling-out and exchanged insults as a smokescreen much as Karl Radek and Iurii Piatakov had done.

Landau moved to Catalonia in November 1936 with Katia. There he "rapidly won substantial influence with the leaders of the POUM which he joined." (Volodarsky, Boris. 2015, 273) According to Hans Schafranek and Pierre Broué, Landau clearly worked closely with Nin.

[22] The reference here is to Thalmann, Paul. 1974, 198.

> [Landau] contributed to *La Batalla*, [the POUM newspaper] and coordinated the POUM's international relations, especially in connection with the preparation of the international conference in Barcelona being planned by the POUM leadership. He still envisaged "a new Zimmerwald" of which the POUM would be the axis. (Broué, Pierre, 2008; Schafranek, Hans. 1980, 80, 85, 86 n.112)

A New Bolshevik Revolution?

Both Wolf and Landau regarded the May Days revolt as the prelude to a Bolshevik-type Revolution. Landau wrote that the goal was to overthrow the bourgeois Spanish Republic, which he called "the democratic counter-revolution." (Schafranek, Hans. 1988, 475) A "provisional government" was even formed on May 5 (471).

At the POUM trial of October, 1938, Nin and Landau were accused of being Gestapo agents. (Volodarsky, Boris. 2015, 278) The Trotskyists in the Second (January, 1937) and Third (March, 1938) Moscow Trials had confessed that Trotsky was collaborating with the Germans. So had the Tukhachevsky Affair defendants of May-June 1937. It was logical that the Soviets and communists generally would have suspected that Nin and Landau, in working for Trotsky, were German agents too.

Trotsky and the Assassinations of Nin, Wolf, and Landau

The Soviets knew what Trotsky was doing. They knew that the Moscow Trials defendants were guilty of at least what they confessed to. But Trotsky publicly denied this, and the Trotskyists believed him. They did not know that it was not Stalin but Trotsky who was lying, in defense of his conspiracy.

The evidence that Trotsky lied demands that we reject the conventional understanding of the repression of Trotskyists in Spain. The Soviet attack on the Trotskyists was neither paranoid nor criminal. The Soviets had no way of knowing how much of Trotsky's conspiratorial activities Wolf, Nin, and others knew about. Wolf had come to Spain directly from Trotsky in Norway, presumably with Trotsky's instructions. It would have been only prudent for the Soviets to assume that Nin and Landau had done so as well.

We don't know whether Nin, Wolf, and Landau knew of Trotsky's collaboration with the Germans. During their secret meeting in Norway in December 1935 Trotsky made it clear to Piatakov that his real plans must be kept secret from his followers. But the Soviets would have assumed that they were doing Trotsky's bidding. That was enough to make them German agents in the eyes of the Soviets.

It was Trotsky, not Stalin, who doomed these men. Nin, Wolf, and Landau went to Spain either as Trotsky's direct representatives – Wolf certainly, Nin probably, Landau possibly as well – or to help with the Trotskyist agenda to undermine Soviet and Spanish Republican policy in the hope of leading a revolution against the Spanish Republican government.

Did Nin, Wolf, and Landau know that Trotsky was lying to the world as, for example, Radek and Piatakov did? Lilia Estrina, one of the closest associates of Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son and chief political assistant, told Pierre Broué that none of Sedov's assistants knew about Trotsky's contacts inside the USSR, that only Sedov and Trotsky knew these details. (Furr, Grover. 2015, 75-6) As far as we know, only Trotsky's closest co-conspirators *inside the USSR* knew about the collusion with Germany and Japan. Of course, after the January, 1937 Moscow Trial, the world knew. But Trotsky's followers outside the USSR chose to believe Trotsky's denials.

Landau believed Trotsky's claims that the charges against the 1936 Moscow Trials defendants were false. It's possible that Wolf knew more, since he worked directly with Trotsky. But it seems unlikely that Nin, Wolf, or Landau knew the truth about Trotsky's collaboration with fascists inside the Soviet Union and with Germany and Japan. Their actions suggest that they believed this was a cynical and slanderous charge. But the Soviet NKVD knew these charges were true.

Trotsky's political fortune rested entirely upon his credibility as a principled Leninist. His political followers believed that Trotsky was honest and truthful, that it was Stalin and his regime who were the falsifiers.

Today we can prove that many of the accusations made against Trotsky in the Moscow Trials were true. If this had been generally known at the time many of Trotsky's followers would have abandoned him. Trotsky knew this. In his statement of December 19-20, 1936, to then-NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov Yuri Piatakov described what Trotsky told him during their secret meeting in Norway in December 1935:

> … that not everything that he was going to say should be reported to his followers in the U.S.S.R. He mentioned once again the difference between the preparation of a coup d'état and a mass uprising and in this connection **much of what he was about to say must not only not be made public (and therefore I should not be surprised that much of it will contradict what is said in his "Bulletins"), but also must not be made known to wider circles of his supporters in the U.S.S.R**.[23] (TsA FSB 1936-1937, LD 264)

The Soviets knew that Wolf was Trotsky's agent in Spain. They either knew or assumed that Nin and Landau were Trotsky's agents too. It was reasonable to believe that they or others like them were in touch with the Germans when they joined the "May Days' rebellion.

The Soviets and Spanish communists believed it was no crime in wartime to assassinate German agents, forge phony documents to incriminate them, etc. These and more drastic measures were widely employed against Germany by the Allies in World War 2.

[23] My thanks to Vladimir L. Bobrov of Moscow for obtaining this important part of Piatakov's investigation file.

Would Nin, Wolf, or Landau have gone to Spain if they had known what we know today about Trotsky's lies and conspiracies? Possibly they would not have adhered to Trotsky's cause at all. But they believed Trotsky, and paid for this with their lives.

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