



Bernard Wolfe Slide Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

Leon Trotsky converses with Diego Rivera.

MEXICO'S CENTENNIALS

Exile and Murder in Mexico

by Bertrand M. Patenaude

There are two myths that die hard about Trotsky's last years in Mexico. The first has to do with Trotsky's affair with Frida Kahlo, which many people have heard about. If they haven't read about it, they've seen the 2002 movie "Frida," with Salma Hayek in the title role. The affair did in fact take place. The myth that dies hard about this affair is that Frida's husband, Diego Rivera, found out about it and that this led him to break off his friendship with Trotsky. The second myth has to do with the murder weapon that was used to assassinate Trotsky in his villa in Coyoacán, which is commonly believed to have been an ice pick. But let's start with Diego.

It was thanks to Diego Rivera that Trotsky landed in Mexico. After Stalin had routed Trotsky in the battle to succeed Lenin, who died in 1924, Stalin banished Trotsky

from the Soviet Union, exiling him to Turkey in 1929. From there, Trotsky eventually moved to France in 1933, then to Norway in 1935, where he remained until December 1936, when the Norwegian government expelled him after coming under intense political pressure from Stalin. The first of the sensational Moscow show trials took place in August 1936. Leading Communists were put on trial for the most fantastic crimes, including assassination, espionage, wrecking and sabotage. Trotsky was portrayed as the mastermind of this conspiracy, directing its operations from abroad. This was the first of three such show trials, each involving major political figures, each time with Trotsky as chief defendant in absentia.

With Norway wanting to be rid of Trotsky, the only country in the world that would take him was Mexico,

thanks to its radical president, Lázaro Cárdenas, who thought it was the right thing to do, and also thanks to the crucial intercession with Cárdenas of Diego Rivera, who called himself a Trotskyist and was certainly hated by the Mexican Communists. The decision to grant Trotsky asylum was controversial, but nonetheless Trotsky and his wife Natalia were welcomed there in January 1937.

Diego and Frida allowed Trotsky and Natalia to reside in their Casa Azul, the Blue House, in Coyoacán, which at the time was a suburb outside Mexico City and is today one of the city's neighborhoods. Rivera was a vital source of funds during the first two years, selling off his paintings and at one point mortgaging his house in nearby San Angel in order to raise money to support Trotsky's household and to pay for his protection.

Diego and Frida were at Trotsky's side during the Dewey Commission hearings held at the Blue House in the spring of 1937. The Dewey Commission was an independent inquiry into the veracity of the Moscow Trials led by American philosopher and public intellectual John Dewey. Late in 1937, it issued a verdict of "not guilty": in other words, the outrageous charges leveled against Trotsky in the Moscow trials had not been proved.

It was after the departure from Mexico of the members of the Dewey Commission in April 1937 that Trotsky and Frida began their affair. Trotsky's relations with Kahlo became known to Natalia, and for a while, it threatened the Trotsky's marriage. They had a short separation that summer, when Trotsky moved to a hacienda about nine hours by car from Coyoacán. It was during that separation that Trotsky and Frida decided to call a halt to their affair.

There is absolutely no evidence that Diego (himself a champion philanderer) found out about any of this — either at the time or later on, when the friendship between Trotsky and Diego disintegrated. Had Rivera discovered that his wife was having an affair with the great Russian revolutionary, his hero, the man for whom he had arranged safe haven in Mexico, Rivera, a jealous man with a habit of threatening people at the point of a gun, might have ended Trotsky's life before Stalin's assassin did the job.

For a time, the friendship between Trotsky and Rivera remained strong. It was Diego who broke the news, in February 1938, that Trotsky's older son, Lyova, had died in a Paris clinic, after an operation to remove his appendix. We will probably never know whether foul play was involved on the part of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, but Trotsky

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Trotsky's study has been preserved as it was on the day he died.



Photo by Carlos Lowry.



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Trotsky tends one of the hundred plus rabbits he raised while in Mexico.

and Natalia had to assume that this was the case.

Trotsky's other children had already died or disappeared. Of his two daughters from a previous marriage, one died of natural causes in the USSR in the 1920s, the other by suicide in Berlin in 1933. Trotsky and Natalia had a younger son, Sergei, who was arrested in Moscow and later shot. Other family members in the USSR endured a similar fate, as did most of Trotsky's followers, all of them swept up in Stalin's Great Terror.

Trotsky's organization in Paris had been penetrated by the NKVD.

In fact, his son Lyova's closest confidant was an NKVD agent, so it is conceivable that Lyova's death was murder. Beginning in 1938, Trotsky had to worry about the NKVD's growing presence in Mexico. This was the result of the Spanish Civil War, a time when Spain became a major recruiting and training ground for the NKVD. As General Franco's Falangist forces rolled to victory, Mexico became a haven for refugees from the war, defenders of the Republic whose number included Stalinist sympathizers, among them NKVD agents.

Diego Rivera's help in building up the defenses at the Blue House and in hiring guards was critically important.

The guards were mostly Americans, young men from New York and also from Minneapolis, where the Trotskyists had put down roots among the Teamsters organization. Despite Diego's generosity, the shortage of funds was scandalous. Trotsky's staff always seemed to be on its last peso. Also scandalous was the poor quality of some of the men sent down to guard him. One keeps asking oneself: Is this the best the great Trotsky could attract? Trotsky himself complained constantly about the quality of the guards, and because of this, he often resisted being guarded.

To support himself and his household, Trotsky continued writing, as he had throughout the 1930s. He established his reputation in the West with his epic *History of the Russian Revolution* and his memoirs, *My Life*, both published in the early 1930s. In Mexico, he agreed to write a biography of Stalin. It was an assignment he resisted because he found his subject very distasteful, but out of financial desperation, he had to take it on. So here we have the remarkable situation of a man having to write the biography of the dictator trying to have him killed in order to protect himself against that dictator's assassins.

Trotsky got off to a fast start with his biography of Stalin in the spring of 1938, but the work bogged down when he reached the part of the story where he and Stalin began to clash politically in Soviet Russia after 1917. Trotsky got serious writer's block, and his health began to fail, with the return of symptoms — fatigue, lethargy, high blood pressure — of a mysterious illness



Photo courtesy of The National Archives.

Trotsky poses with American Trotskyites, April 1940.

that had paralyzed him at critical moments in the power struggle of the 1920s.

The entire situation — the lack of funds, the health problems, the demands of publisher and agent, etc. — got worse in the fall of 1938, when the friendship between Trotsky and Diego began to fracture. This had nothing to do with Frida, who was away in New York and then in Paris, exhibiting her work. Rather, the friendship seems to have been destined to go sour. You had, on the one hand, the rigid, prickly, angular Trotsky and, on the other, the reckless, riotous, gargantuan Diego. The lion and the elephant. Diego bathed irregularly, dressed carelessly and seldom arrived on time for anything. Trotsky, meanwhile, was a stickler for neatness, regimen and routine. Both men had tremendous work ethics, but Diego's self-discipline was restricted almost entirely to his painting. And with brush in hand, he tended to lose track of everything else.

On the Day of the Dead, November 2, 1938, Diego walked into Trotsky's study at the Blue House and presented him with a sugar skull with the name STALIN spelled out across the forehead. Trotsky was not amused. As soon as Diego had left the house, Trotsky ordered his assistant to have the offending object destroyed.

The friendship was now fast unraveling. The split came that winter, at the start of Mexico's long presidential

election season (which would culminate in July 1940 with the election of Manuel Ávila Camacho to succeed Cárdenas, who was ineligible for reelection). Diego's erratic attempts to influence the presidential campaign made it clear to Trotsky that the painter was not a Trotskyist after all — indeed, apparently not even a Marxist. Given Diego's very public political “zig-zagging,” as Trotsky called it, Trotsky, who had pledged not to involve himself in Mexican politics, felt he had no choice but to separate himself from Diego and move out of the Blue House. A new villa was found a few blocks away, and Trotsky moved in on May 5, 1939.

Trotsky and Diego would never meet again. At this point in the story, another of the Big Three Mexican muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros, enters the picture. (Trotsky had a brief and memorable meeting with the other great Mexican muralist, José Clemente Orozco, in Guadalajara in the summer of 1938.) Siqueiros was the late bloomer of the Big Three muralists, partly because he was very heavily involved in Communist politics. Siqueiros went off to fight in the Spanish Civil War. It is said that he commanded a brigade and then a division of the Republican Army, attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel. It is very likely that while he was in Spain he was recruited by the NKVD.

After his return to Mexico in January 1939, Siqueiros began work on one of his most important murals, “Portrait

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Photo from Keystone/Getty Images.

Communist leaders including Joseph Stalin (far right) and Leon Trotsky (second from left) salute supporters during the Russian Revolution.

of the Bourgeoisie,” a masterpiece of 1930s mural art located in the stairwell of the Mexican Electricians Union in Mexico City. But he was also involved in an activity on the side, sponsored by the NKVD: he was enlisted to lead a commando raid on Trotsky’s home. The raid took place before dawn on May 24, 1940. Twenty men dressed in police and military uniforms and armed with machine guns entered the grounds, let in by one of Trotsky’s American guards from New York, who had been enlisted by the NKVD. Once in place outside the Trotsky’s bedroom, and with Trotsky’s guards pinned down in their quarters, the intruders unleashed a barrage of machine gun fire, a crossfire from three directions into the bedroom.

The raiders carried three homemade bombs, only one of which went off, in a room adjacent to the bedroom. They left after 15 minutes, believing that they had completed the job, but in fact they had failed. Trotsky and Natalia had ducked down in a corner of the room and survived. Trotsky’s comrades called it a “miraculous escape,” although Trotsky insisted that his survival was the result of sheer luck.

Now began the frantic preparations for the next attack, and the anticipation was that it would be carried out with bombs. The villa was to be transformed into a fortress. Turrets would be constructed atop the high walls, double iron doors would replace the wooden entrance to the garage, steel shutters would cover the

windows, bomb-proof wire netting would be raised and barbed-wire barriers would be moved into position. But even as these fortifications began to rise up, the NKVD decided to resort to its fallback plan. The assignment of liquidating Trotsky — and the orders came from Stalin himself — would be entrusted to a lone operative who had managed to penetrate Trotsky’s inner circle.

He was Ramón Mercader, a Spaniard recruited by the NKVD during the civil war. In Paris in the summer of 1938, Mercader, disguised as a Belgian student using the alias Jacques Mornard, seduced the sister of one of Trotsky’s former assistants. She was a Brooklyn Trotskyist by the name of Sylvia Ageloff. Mercader-Mornard followed Sylvia to New York in the fall of 1939. Now assuming the identity of Frank Jacson [sic], Canadian businessman, he maneuvered Sylvia down to Mexico City and used her to insinuate himself into Trotsky’s household. He claimed to have been a heavy financial supporter of the French Trotskyists back in Paris — and of course by the summer of 1940, there was no way to verify this information with the French Trotskyists, who were on the run from the invading Germans.

The outbreak of World War II, which began with the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, struck a strong blow against Trotsky and his followers in New York City, the center of the Trotskyist movement at that time. When the war in Europe began, Trotsky insisted on supporting

the Soviet Union, despite the fact that Stalin's regime had wiped out his family and comrades and was trying to have him killed. Trotsky tried to justify the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and the Baltic states as well as the Winter War against Finland in 1939-40 by arguing that the Red Army was spreading socialism to these conquered lands — that is, the state ownership of the means of production. Trotsky continued to maintain that the Soviet Union was a workers' state, despite the fact that at the same time he classified the Stalinist regime, together with Nazi Germany, as "totalitarian."

Trotsky's stance on the war and the Soviet Union split the Trotskyists in the United States: a majority supported Trotsky (many doing so more out of loyalty than out of conviction), while a minority wanted him to condemn Soviet military aggression outright and deny that the USSR was a workers' state of any kind. Sylvia Ageloff, the cat's paw in the story, took the side of the minority, and when she got to Mexico City at the beginning of 1940, she was invited to a debate with Trotsky and the guards at the house in Coyoacán.

This is where Ramón Mercader saw his opening. Posing as a supporter of Trotsky in this ideological dispute, he wrote a draft of an article defending the majority position. He had

it ready in August 1940 and asked Trotsky to read it. He maneuvered to be alone with Trotsky in the late afternoon of August 20, as the guards were busy on the roof installing a new siren, just received from the comrades in Los Angeles.

Mercader, whom Trotsky continued to believe was a Canadian businessman by the name of Frank Jacson, a man who sympathized with the cause and was a potential source of much-needed funds, entered Trotsky's study at around 5:30 p.m., carrying his trench coat. Inside the coat was a dagger, a handgun and a pickaxe — not an ice pick, as is commonly believed, but a pickaxe: one end was pointed, like an ice pick, the other was flat and wide; the handle, about a foot long, had been cut down for concealment. The pickaxe was the assassin's weapon of choice. He was able to carry out his deadly assignment even though Trotsky put up a ferocious struggle for his life.

Bertrand M. Patenaude is a lecturer in History and International Relations at Stanford University and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. His recent book, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, describes Leon Trotsky's last years in Mexico in the late 1930s. This article is adapted from a talk Patenaude gave for CLAS on April 22, 2010.

A detail from the Rivera mural "Man, Controller of the Universe."



Photo by Gabriel Aguilera.