The Death of Leon Trotsky

LEON TROTSKY WAS one of the founders of the Soviet Union and an obvious candidate to replace Lenin after his death. Unfortunately for him, it was Joseph Stalin who came to power, and Trotsky went into a long forced exile that eventually took him to Mexico, where he found asylum. On August 20, 1940, a Stalinist agent wounded Trotsky in the head with an ice axe in his house in Coyoacán, Mexico. Just a few hours later, Mexican neurosurgeons operated on him at the Cruz Verde Hospital in Mexico City. The axe had broken Trotsky’s parietal bone and, after tearing the meninges, had damaged the encephalon. Despite the care provided by physicians and nurses, Trotsky passed away 25 hours after he was attacked, a victim of bleeding and shock. This article presents a review of Trotsky’s last day, with special emphasis on the doctors who performed the surgery and who took care of the Russian revolutionary in his final moments. The results of Trotsky’s autopsy are also discussed. The assassination of Leon Trotsky is one of the most dramatic events of the first half of the 20th century to have taken place on Mexican soil, and those final hours are an important moment in the history of Mexican neurosurgery and in the history of the world.

KEY WORDS: Craniocerebral trauma, Famous persons, Homicide, Penetrating head injuries, 20th century history, Stab wounds

In the spring of 1918, Leon Trotsky was arguably one of the most powerful men in Soviet Russia (Figure 1). As the head of the Red Army, he led one of the largest war machines ever built and was an obvious candidate for succeeding Lenin as head of state. Only 22 years and a few months later, however, Trotsky struggled for his life in a bed in a hospital in Mexico City, thousands of miles away from his homeland, injured by an assassin working for the same political apparatus that he helped to build. The once powerful commander was now a dying man, wounded by an ice axe swung into his skull, and despite the work of the Mexican neurosurgeons, nothing could be done for him.

RISE TO POWER

Leon Trotsky, born Lev Davidovich Bronstein, was one of the most prominent leaders of the Russian October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power. He was also a writer and a theorist, publishing several books and dissertations on Marxism and Communism. His ideas are the basis for a school of thought that opposed Stalinism, which became the official view of communism in the Soviet Union after Lenin’s death.

Trotsky was born in the village of Yanovka, in present-day Ukraine, to a family of Jewish farmers. He spent his youth in the cosmopolitan and culturally diverse port city of Odessa and in the town of Nikolaev, where he became involved with other students and young workers who were determined to overthrow the Tsar. It was in those student groups where Trotsky first became exposed to the ideas of socialism and also where he became known...
as an audacious and determined speaker. He was one of the founders of the South Russian Workers’ Union, and because of that, he was arrested in 1898 and sent to Siberia, his first exile. 2 He escaped in 1902, using the pseudonym “Trotsky” for the first time in his forged passport. 3 After leaving Russia, he moved to London and joined the ranks of the Marxist newspaper Iskra, where he met Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin. It was in that city that he also met the woman that would be his companion up until the day of his death, Natalia Sedova. 3

After the events of the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky returned to Russia and settled in St. Petersburg, where he headed the St. Petersburg Council of Workers’ Deputies. By then, Trotsky was convinced that the only way to change Russia was to establish a “permanent revolution,” led by workers and intellectuals and founded upon Marxist ideology. 1 He was once again arrested and exiled to Siberia in 1907, but he escaped and started a long emigration that took him to Austria, Switzerland, France, Spain, and the United States. He was living in New York when Tsar Nicholas II abdicated after the success of the 1917 February Revolution, and he made his way back to his homeland to be part of the new country that was being born. 4

After the Bolsheviks came to power, Trotsky became People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs and then Commissar of Army and Navy Affairs. As such, he was the head of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, in which the Bolshevik forces defeated a combined Allied Force, named the White Army, after more than 3 years of fighting. It was during this war that conflict first arose between Trotsky and Joseph Stalin, one of the members of the Politburo, who openly challenged many of Trotsky’s decisions as head of the army. 2

DECLINE

After the Civil War was won by the Bolsheviks, Trotsky faced what was perhaps an even harder struggle inside the ranks of his own party. His confrontation with Stalin grew even more after Lenin’s death, and this buildup of conflicts eventually led to Trotsky’s expulsion from the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1927. Stalin, who was by then the Head of the Soviet Union, outlawed any opposition to him and forced Trotsky and his followers into exile in 1928. 4 Trotsky was sent in exile to Kazakhstan, followed by expulsion from the USSR to Turkey, and then to France and Norway. However, his stay in those countries was brief, owing to the pressure from the Stalinist government, who resented having Trotsky so close to the Soviet border. In August 1936, the final blow was dealt against Trotsky and the rest of the old Bolsheviks with the first of many show trials, staged by Stalin as part of his Great Purges. In the first trial, 16 former members of the party, including distinguished revolutionaries such as Kamenev and Zinoviev, were found guilty of multiple crimes and executed. 6 Although Trotsky was not officially indicted in the show trials, he had already been judged and sentenced to death by Stalin himself. By then, the Norwegian authorities had placed Trotsky under house arrest, so he was grateful when he was rescued by an invitation to live in Mexico. Trotsky’s move to America in January 1937 was made possible both because of the intervention of famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera (who was also a fervent communist) and by the liberal government headed by President Lázaro Cárdenas. 7

In Mexico, Trotsky was free to travel, write, and express his ideas and theories. During his stay in the country, he founded the Fourth International, a communist organization that was meant to be an oppositionist force to Stalinism. He also became a prominent personality in Mexican society and mingled with famous people like Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and André Breton. His house in the Coyocacán neighborhood of Mexico City was filled with visitors who wanted to know Trotsky and to hear his ideas. This freedom, however, also made him an easy target for the Stalinist agents who wanted him dead. The first attack on Trotsky took place on May 24, 1940, when a group of armed men led by painter David Alfaro Siqueiros fired hundreds of bullets at Trotsky’s house on Viena Street. Luckily, Trotsky and his family were not injured in the shooting. 6

After the assassination attempt, security around Trotsky was doubled, and his house became a fortress guarded by Mexican policemen and several American bodyguards, hired by Trotsky’s friends in the United States. These measures, however, were soon proven inadequate.

THE ATTACK

At approximately 6:00 PM on the afternoon of August 20, 1940, the Cruz Verde Hospital in Mexico City received an emergency phone call from the Coyocacán police office. They quickly dispatched an ambulance, driven by Ramón Cruz, to the house on Viena Street. When the paramedics arrived on scene, they found Trotsky’s wife, Natalia Sedova, leaning over his body, covered in blood. At first, the paramedics thought he was dead, but after examining him, they discovered that he was still breathing and he was rushed to the hospital 9 km away. 8

About 40 minutes before the call was received, a visitor arrived at Trotsky’s house. His name was Frank Jacson, a Canadian citizen who was also the boyfriend of Silvia Ageloff, one of Trotsky’s associates from New York. Jacson had become a frequent visitor to the house, and he often showed his manuscripts and discussed current topics with Trotsky. That particular day, Jacson was carrying a hat and an overcoat, despite the fact that the weather was quite good. Natalia Sedova escorted Jacson to Trotsky’s studio and closed the door behind her. A few seconds later, she heard a terrible scream, and when she rushed to the studio, she found her husband resting against the wall of the dining room with his head full of blood. The assassin was carrying an ice axe concealed in the overcoat, and when Trotsky sat down at his studio table, he stood up, took the weapon out and dealt a blow to Trotsky’s head. 8 A mountaineering ice axe is a tool used both as a walking stick and as a security anchor when going uphill. It has a narrow end, called the pick, and a flared, wide end used for chopping steps called the adze. 9 It was with the adze of the axe that Jacson wounded Trotsky in the head, hitting him on the right side of the skull, fracturing the parietal bone and penetrating 7 cm into the encephalon. 8 Trotsky...
did not lose consciousness right away; as a matter of fact, he was able to speak and tell his bodyguards to spare Jacson’s life for him to tell his story (Figure 2).

The first doctor to examine Trotsky at his house was his head physician, Wenceslao Dutrem Domínguez, brought by his bodyguards from his nearby home. Dr. Dutrem was a Spaniard exiled to Mexico after the Civil War who had practiced medicine and pharmacology in Barcelona, where he prepared a medication called Erotil, marketed as a cure for erectile dysfunction. Dutrem found that Trotsky’s left hand and arm were paralyzed and that the movements of his right hand were clumsy and uncoordinated. He stood by his patient and Natalia Sedova until the ambulance arrived, but he was not able to do anything to help Trotsky.

THE SURGERY

When the ambulance arrived at the Cruz Verde Hospital, which was located at the corner of Victoria and Revillagigedo Streets, Trotsky was immediately transferred to the operating room. There, a group of surgeons and other specialists in medicine had already been assembled. The main surgeon was Dr. Joaquín Mass Patiño, who also worked at the nearby Hospital Juárez. Mass was one of the first neurosurgeons in Mexico, alongside Manuel Velasco Suárez, and the founder of the first neurosurgical ward and neuroradiology service in the city. Not much has been written about Mass, but he did write a paper in December 1957 describing his method for treating penetrating gunshot wounds to the skull. In that article, Mass concluded that the first step when treating any penetrating wound to the head was to treat edema and that trying to stop bleeding from the encephalon was useless because it was always found to be uncontrollable and the surgical intervention only added “surgical shock and anesthetic intoxication.” In that same article, he also stated that perhaps one of the only advantages of early surgical management was to extract pieces of the skull found in the wound’s trajectory because they could become foci for infection. Aiding Dr. Mass was Dr. Rubén Leñero Ruiz, a young surgeon who had a meteoric career in the medical services of Mexico City. At the age of 38, he was already the Director of Medical Services of the city and creator of the Mexican Society of Trauma. Dr. Leñero passed away only 2 years after Trotsky, a victim of typhus, and the flagship hospital of Mexico City’s health services is currently named after him. The third celebrity physician caring for Trotsky was Dr. Gustavo Baz Prada, who at that time was the rector of Mexico’s National Autonomous University. Dr. Baz was sent to the Cruz Verde as a representative of President Cárdenas himself, who was particularly fond of Trotsky (he would later declare Trotsky’s assassination the dirtiest crime ever committed on Mexican soil). Dr. Baz would go on to become the head of Mexico’s Secretariat of Health and the governor of the State of Mexico. Finally, another spectator of the surgery was Dr. Jacinto Segovia, a Spanish physician who was a former professor of surgical pathology at the University of Madrid and who exiled himself to Mexico at the onset of the Spanish Civil War. The remaining members of the team were surgeon Everardo García Espino and anesthesiologist Salvador Méndez.

After performing a radiographic study of Trotsky’s skull (Figure 3), Mass started the surgical intervention at 9:00 PM, roughly 3 hours after the attack. Trotsky’s hair was shaved and a 25-cm² trepanation was done to the skull, finding a comminute fracture of the parietal bone with bony fragments inside the cranial vault. The meninges...
During the morning of August 21, Trotsky's health deteriorated, and he was not able to recover consciousness. The doctors administered physiological serum and oxygen, but no improvement was noticed. By midday, Dr. Mass noted that the wound was bleeding profusely and pointed out that the ventricles were filling up with blood. In the afternoon, Trotsky's breathing became fast and erratic and Natalia Sedova was told by physicians that her husband was about to die. The last medical report signed by Dr. Mass came out at 6:00 PM, stating that Trotsky's status was “Critical. Temperature 38.1°C. Pulse 140. Breathing 41. Blood pressure in the right arm 78 × 68. Left arm 78 × 64.” The diagnosis given in the report was that of “flooding of the cerebral ventricles, an extremely severe injury that darkens the prognosis.” An hour and 25 minutes later, Trotsky's pulse became weak, and the doctors administered an injection of adrenaline with no effect. Dr. Leñero examined the patient and found that his pupils were nonresponsive, declaring him dead at 7:25 PM on August 21, 1940, 25 hours and 35 minutes after being attacked by Jakson.

THE AUTOPSY

Trotsky's remains were moved to the Alcazar funeral home in downtown Mexico City on the morning of August 22. At 2:00 PM, his casket was taken to the embalming room and the body was extracted. The corpse was still dressed in the Cruz Verde gown, and blood was still dripping from the bandages placed on the wound. In the room were surgeons Dr. José Rojo de la Vega and Dr. José Edmundo Sol, Dr. Erasmo Marín, director of the city’s medicolegal service, and Arturo Orozco and Francisco Ortega,
refused to grant permission for such a transfer to avoid political demonstrations. After several days in the funeral home, Trotsky’s body was cremated. His ashes rest in a monument built in the garden of the house on Viena Street; just a few steps away from the place where he was murdered.

**AFTERMATH**

Trotsky’s assassination is one of the most dramatic events of the first half of the 20th century in Mexico. Even though history has mostly ignored Trotsky, he is undoubtedly one of the most important figures of the 20th century because he was an essential character in the construction of the Soviet Union.

His assassin, Frank Jacson, who also held a Belgian passport under the name Jacques Mornard, was later found to be a Spanish communist named Jaime Ramón Mercader del Río Hernández, who had important connections with the GPU, Stalin’s secret police. Mercader was imprisoned in Mexico City’s Palacio de Lecumberri for 20 years, without ever confessing the true reasons for his crime. After his release from prison, he spent his time between Cuba and the Soviet Union, where he shamefully received the nation’s highest distinction, the Hero of the Soviet Union medal. Mercader passed away in 1978 and is buried in Moscow’s Kuntsevo Cemetery.

Natalia Sedova stayed in Mexico, living in the house that she shared with Trotsky and dedicated her life to her family. She died in Paris in 1962 and her ashes are buried next to those of Trotsky in their Coyoacán home, which is now a museum.

Trotsky was never “rehabilitated” in his homeland, and even Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Head of the Soviet Union, delivered a speech denouncing Trotsky in traditional Stalinist terms in 1987. Just 4 years later, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and Trotsky’s ideas were no longer officially frowned upon.

Ironically, it was Trotsky who more than half a century before had warned that with its complete disregard for the working class, bureaucracy would ultimately destroy the Soviet Union and clear the path for the return of capitalism. His death was as much a result of neurotrauma as of hatred and revenge. The doctors and surgeons who took care of him during his last hours did as much as they could, given the severity of the wound and the resources available. Those last hours, however, are an important moment in the history of Mexican neurosurgery and in the history of the world.

**Disclosure**

The author has no personal financial or institutional interest in any of the drugs, materials, or devices described in this article.

**REFERENCES**

The article provides interesting details on the circumstances, management, surgery, and autopsy of the open head injury of Lev (Leon) Trotsky in Mexico City in August 1940. It gives a glimpse into the history of Mexican neurosurgery and is based on anecdotal evidence of the subject from contemporary Mexican periodicals and secondary sources. The clinical part comprises about half of this article. Trotsky experienced a severe open head injury complicated by a depressed cranial fracture and cerebral laceration. Witness accounts state that Trotsky was sitting at the table reading a manuscript when hit by an ax. According to the description, there was a clear lucid interval (Trotsky tried to fight against his assasin and was able to speak after the injury), which is typical for acute intracranial hematomas. Indeed, a subdural hematoma was found at the autopsy. The hematoma that caused Trotsky's death was not diagnosed while he was alive. The reason was an inadequate exploration of the wound during surgery. The trepanation window was too small (25 cm²), which did not allow proper revision of intracranial structures, hemostasis, and control of brain edema (“the encephalon was herniated through the wound”). However, large trepanation windows had been practiced since the late 19th century, which did not allow proper revision of intracranial structures, hemostasis, and control of brain edema (“the encephalon was herniated through the wound”).

Unfortunately, the author relied on press reports and did not use archival sources, which might be available in Mexico City (such as Trotsky's case records or protocols of his surgery and autopsy). Why was Trotsky's brain not preserved and not subjected to a neuropathological study?

To conclude, the medical part of the article by Soto-Pérez-de-Celis vividly illustrates a low level of Mexican neurosurgery in 1930s. Had Trotsky been in more experienced hands, he might have survived. The author's claim that the assassination of Trotsky “represents a landmark in the history of Mexican neurosurgery” is unfounded. The article does not mention any impact of Trotsky's case on the development of neurosurgery in Mexico.

The rest of the article presents a brief biography of Trotsky. It might be worth mentioning that there is evidence that he had epileptic seizures in infancy. Trotsky initiated “Red Terror” after the October Revolution. The term was coined by Trotsky and defined as “a weapon used against a doomed class that does not want to perish.” His biography was a subject of 2 movies: *Assassination of Trotsky* (France-Italy-UK, 1972) and *Trotsky* (Russia, 1993). Trotsky was a protagonist of an opposition
leader in 2 novels by George Orwell (Snowball in Animal Farm and Goldstein in 1984).

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The assassination of Trotsky, like the assassinations of Archduke Ferdinand and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, had broad social and political repercussions. There is a rich literature on the medical aspects of the Kennedy assassination, but little has been said about Trotsky’s. This article corrects the oft-repeated but erroneous assertion that Trotsky was killed by an ice pick. He was not: the medical records confirm that fatal blow was struck with an ice ax, even though the ice pick was an assassination device in use at the time.

The enmity between Stalin and Trotsky was long-standing. Beginning in 1923, 6 years after the Bolshevik Revolution, Trotsky led an opposition faction within the Russian Communist Party. He protested, inter alia, the development of a powerful, centralized and arbitrary Bolshevik bureaucracy consolidating under Stalin. Lenin came to agree just before his death in 1924.1

Whether or not their idea of democracy was in any way parallel to democratic theory in the West, Trotsky and his opposition group used the idiom of a return to the ideal of a “workers’ democracy” in attacks on the politburo. Concessions were obtained but never implemented. On November 7, 1927, 10 years after the Revolution, Trotsky was expelled from the Party and forced to flee.

Immediately thereafter, Stalin began to eliminate Trotsky’s friends, family, and colleagues. The list included almost all of Trotsky’s small circle of intimates: Joffe, Glazman, Butov, Blumkin, Sermuks, and Poznansky. Many had played important military and political roles during the civil war after the Revolution. Anti-Semitism played no small part in this campaign. Trotsky commented that Stalin intended to silence the writings and consequently the political influence of the opposition by destroying its leadership.2 Given the power ascribed to journalism, political commentary, and propaganda at the time, this strategy was pursued by the Left and the Right alike. It was sometimes difficult to decipher which views belonged on which side of the aisle.3

In 1928, Trotsky was exiled to Kazakhstan near the Chinese border, and from there to Büyükada off the coast of Istanbul, Turkey, where he stayed for the next 4 years. Members of the defeated White Army who had taken refuge in Istanbul threatened his life, but he was protected by Communist sympathizers and volunteers. In 1933, Trotsky was offered asylum in France as long as he did not visit Paris. His son and political collaborator, Leon Sedov, was assassinated in France in 1937. Trotsky then became persona non grata.

He was granted asylum in Norway by Trygve Lie, the Minister of Justice. He resided near Oslo in relative freedom for 2 years. He was then placed under house arrest and subsequently transferred to Mexico on a freighter under secret arrangements made between Norway and Mexico. President Lázaro Cárdenas welcomed Trotsky warmly and openly and arranged for a special train to bring him to Mexico City from the port of entry. Trotsky wrote unceasingly in exile, including many of his most important works criticizing Stalin. In his diaries, for example, he wrote “Stalin did not see that even without a secretariat I could carry on literary work, which, in its turn, could further the creating of a new apparat. Even the cleverest bureaucrat displays an incredible short-sightedness in certain questions!”4

In 1939, after the German invasion of Poland, Trotsky agreed to testify before a U.S. Congressional committee chaired by Martin Dies, who sought to suppress the American Communist Party. Trotsky let it be known that he would expose and condemn the activities of the NKVD, the Russian secret police, but would also speak in support of the American Communist Party and would call for transformation of the World War into a world revolution. As a result, he was denied a visa to enter the United States. Stalin accused Trotsky of being on the payroll of the FBI. The attempts to assassinate Trotsky are eloquently described in this article.

Unlike many other revolutionary figures, Trotsky was never rehabilitated, but his books became available in Russia once again approximately 20 years ago.

Ramon Mercader, the assassin, eventually returned to Moscow where he was set to work in the Foreign Languages Publishing House. He kept to himself and was known for his archaic Spanish (Mussa Kazhdan, personal communication, 1983. Mercader was seated next to Mme. Kazhdan when he returned. She and her husband, Professor Alexander Kazhdan, a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, emigrated to the United States and resided at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington. She taught Russian to U.S. government officials and spoke of Mercader in passing at a dinner party.)

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