

# The New Criterion

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## Trotsky on ice

*by James Panero*

It isn't every day you have lunch with the weapon that killed Leon Trotsky. Or that you find yourself seated next to Jonna Mendez, the former CIA Intelligence Officer, who with her husband, Tony (of *Argo* fame), served as the Agency's Chief of Disguise. Then again, the International Spy Museum, my luncheon host, is not your everyday institution. Founded in 2002 by Milton Maltz, the broadcasting magnate and United States Navy veteran who once worked for the National Security Agency, the museum is designed to recognize the patriotic service of our country's secret warriors while also telling the story of international espionage.

When the International Spy Museum unveils its new 140,000-square-foot headquarters in Washington, D.C., on May 12, at least one recent addition to the collection should drive home the point of Communism's razor-sharp brutality: my unexpected lunch companion—the ice ax used in Mexico City in 1940 to murder Leon Trotsky.

H. Keith Melton, an expert on espionage tradecraft, pursued this storied object for years before acquiring it in the late 2000s. Now, in gifting it to the museum, he revealed just how this unlikely weapon was used to carry out one of the most infamous political assassinations of the last century.

Once comrades in Marxism-Leninism, Leon Trotsky and Josef Stalin split in the infamous schism that tore through the Bolshevik leadership and the many followers of its October Revolution. George Orwell based *Animal Farm*, of course, on their bitter clash of ideologies and personalities. Trotsky, the idealist represented by the character “Snowball,” sought continued international socialist revolution; Stalin, the thuggish “Napoleon,” wanted to consolidate power in Soviet Communism.

Trotsky was pushed out of the Soviet Union just as Snowball was driven off the farm. The one-time heir apparent to Vladimir Lenin was first exiled to the satellite Soviet states. He fled through Turkey, France, and Norway before ultimately being welcomed by the Socialist government of Mexico in 1937.

First residing with the painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo (who became his lover), Trotsky and his family eventually moved into a fortified compound in the village of Coyoacán, near Mexico City. Armed guards supplied by his many supporters in the American Socialist Workers Party provided protection for the “Old Man,” as he was known. Trotsky wrote prolifically during the period. He also declared the Fourth International to support “permanent revolution” against the nationalist bureaucracy of Stalin and his Soviet Comintern.

These public activities contributed to Stalin's decision to order Trotsky's assassination in 1939. Stalin tasked his secret police of the NKVD with the killing. Already the most powerful spy network in the world and the predecessor to the KGB, the NKVD set in action at least three autonomous plots against Trotsky.

The first was an all-out assault, code-named HORSE, on the compound by twenty-four Communists battled-hardened by the Spanish Civil War. After a treacherous American guard gave them entry, in the early morning hours of May 24, 1940, an assault team quietly entered the compound dressed as Mexican policemen. They mounted a machine gun by a eucalyptus tree to pin down the guard quarters. Meanwhile, a raiding party shot up Trotsky's bedroom from multiple directions, firing several hundred rounds. Seventy-three bullets entered the room. None other than the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, a Stalinist sympathizer and the public face of the operation, was the given the honor of firing the final rounds at Trotsky's bedsheets from the doorway. Today, Siqueiros must be the only blue-chip artist to have headed up a Stalinist assassination attempt.

Remarkably, Trotsky and his wife both survived the attack by hiding in a darkened corner of the room during the shootout. After the failed assault, the American Trotskyists strengthened the compound with electric gates and tightened protocols. The NKVD knew they would need new tactics to get inside Trotsky's defenses.

Set in motion long before the failed raid, a second plot was already underway. Caridad and Ramón Mercader, a mother-son team of Catalan communists,

veterans of the Spanish Civil War, were tapped by the NKVD to infiltrate Trotsky's inner circle. With the help of Communist Party USA and disguised as a wealthy Belgian diplomat, Ramón seduced a New York Trotskyite named Sylvia Ageloff as she traveled in the summer of 1938 to Paris for Trotsky's Fourth International. Taking a second cover as "Frank Jacson," Ramón joined Ageloff in Mexico City and became Trotsky's driver, offering up his Buick automobile for the compound's use after Trotsky's vehicles were stolen in the Siqueiros raid.

While the American security team urged Trotsky to search compound visitors, the Old Man refused to do so for his "trusted" insiders even after the raid. Mercader therefore knew he could smuggle small weapons inside. While he had a pistol (and brought it along at the time of the assassination), Mercader and his NKVD handlers looked for an instrument that could deliver a more silent blow, one that would allow an assassin to make his escape. They settled on a 1920s ice-climbing ax, or piolet. Seasoned in deadly hand-to-hand combat from the Spanish Civil War, Mercader believe he could deliver a single direct blow to Trotsky's skull with the pick end of the instrument that would kill him instantly.

On August 20, 1940, as his mother waited for him outside in a getaway car, Mercader went to meet Trotsky, nominally for advice on an editorial he was writing. Under his raincoat he carried a .45-caliber Star pistol and the ice ax, with its ash handle cut down to 12 inches. As Trotsky began reading his article, Mercader dealt him a single blow from behind. But the assassin closed his eyes during the hit, striking a glancing blow that cracked Trotsky's skull but did not kill him immediately. "Trotsky gave a cry that I shall never forget," he later testified. "It was a long 'Aaaa,' endlessly long, and I think it

still echoes in my brain. Trotsky jumped up jerkily, rushed at me, and bit my hand. Look, you can still see the marks of his teeth. I pushed him away and he fell to the floor. Then he rose and stumbled out of the room.” Trotsky died in a nearby hospital the day after the attack.

Hearing the noise, Trotsky’s guards rushed in and beat Mercader, who was arrested, tried, and convicted for murder. Through the trial and his nineteen-year imprisonment, he continued to call himself a Trotsky sympathizer. It was only after his release and his hero’s welcome back in the Soviet Union in 1960 that Mercader’s true identity became known. Meanwhile, the murder weapon he dropped to the floor was entered into evidence and wound up as a retirement gift to a Mexico City police chief. Kept under a bed for decades, the weapon resurfaced in 2005 as his daughter brokered a deal to sell it to Melton.

At the International Spy Museum on May 12, the ice ax will join Mercader’s gold watch—engraved and awarded by the Soviet Union in 1965—his eyeglasses, which were broken in his beating and arrest, a pair of binoculars used in the plot, and a self-portrait by his mother.

“The aging revolutionary, who believed that all means—lying, treachery, violence, or murder—were acceptable to achieve an end,” Melton says of Trotsky, became a “victim of the same ruthlessness.”

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