

Local Brawls and Global Confrontation: transnational political violence among the exiled Left in Mexico City during 1943

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Abstract

This article traces the local and global context of two incidents of political violence among the transnational community of left-wing political exiles in Mexico City during March and April 1943. On both occasions, violent clashes resulted from attempts to commemorate two Polish-Jewish socialists who had been convicted and executed in the Soviet Union as “fifth columnist spies”. A close reading of locations and chronological context relies on primary materials from Mexican, US-American, German, Austrian and Russian archives as well as the contemporary local press. The local logic of political practice (including violence) on the geographic and political periphery of world politics can be deciphered as an urban choreography of larger ideological conflicts among the Left and contributes to our understanding of the political meaning of the conflict as much as the overarching ideological debate that contributed to the global confrontation of the Cold War.

Keywords: Exile, Mexico City, political violence, transnational history

On Thursday, the 11th of March 1943, the anglophone section of the Mexican newspaper *Novedades* included a short notice of a violent incident that had occurred the evening before at *Calle de República de Cuba no. 81* just three blocks north of the *Zócalo*, the central plaza of the city. The brief summary of events mentioned that a meeting of “alleged Trotskyists” had been organized to “protest against the execution of two Trotskyist spies by a Soviet firing-squad”. The police, however, had to intervene, the paper explained, “when a part of the audience, which had been brought in by handbills distributed among the local foreign colony,

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protested against alleged pro-Nazi remarks by those officiating”.¹ The matter could have passed as an obscure brawl among foreigners, had it not been for the intervention of the oppositional newspaper *Excelsior* the following day which displayed a distinctly different attitude towards the confrontation of Wednesday night. The paper explained that the meeting had been organized by the *Bund*, a socialist association of mainly Polish Jews, to honour the memory of Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, two leading *Bund* functionaries who after the combined German and Soviet attack on Poland in 1939 had found asylum in the USSR.² In February 1943, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Maxim Litvinov, had confirmed that both Ehrlich and Alter had been convicted and executed as „spies“ and „fifth columnists“ traitors. Their *Bund* comrades immediately launched an international campaign of protest against what they perceived to be an act of Soviet terror against Polish socialists with anti-Semitic undertones.³ This campaign had originated in the U.S. and culminated in a number of commemorative meetings in New York, Chicago, Boston and Newark, as well as in London.⁴ In Mexico City, however, the meeting of 10th March had not proceeded as planned: *Excelsior* reported that prior to the opening of the meeting „an unusual number of people of diverse nationalities“ had gathered at the location and did not leave even after the Jewish organizers had advised them that „if they did not understand Yiddish their presence at the meeting would be pointless“. The paper concluded that among the crowd a small group attended the meeting intent on provoking disorder, and reported what followed:

When Chopin’s funeral march was about to be performed, the president of the organizing committee asked everybody present to rise. The communists flatly denied to do this and responded with raised voices: “Down with the Nazi agents!”, “Death to the fifth column!”, “Long live the Red Army!”. And obscuring their

¹This research forms part of the project “Left-wing Exile in Mexico, 1934-60” at the Institute for Iberian and Latin American History of the University of Cologne and is funded by the European Research Council (grant no. 312717).

“Police break up anti-Soviet fest”, *Novedades* (México, D.F.), 11 Mar 1943, quoted after: Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands (DÖW, Vienna), Archiv no. 2903/4, diverse Materialien über Emigration in Mexiko, s. fol.

² “Escándalo de los Comunistas en el Comité Israelita”, *Excelsior* (México, D.F.), 12 Mar 1943, 2nd ed., 1 & 4.

³ This campaign was later documented in a brochure: *Homenaje a Tresca, Alter y Ehrlich. El asalto stalinista al Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano* (México D.F.: Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano, 1943), 6-10. See also the simultaneous publications of the international campaign of commemoration and protest: *The Case of Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter*, foreword by Camille Huysmans (London: Liberty Publishers, 1943); J. Hart, *Henrik Erlich un Wiktor Alter: a lebn fun kempfer – a toit fun martirer* (New York: Bund, 1943); *Henrik Erlich un Viktor Alter: Gedank-Bukh* (Buenos Aires: Di Bundiše Grupe, 1943); *The Living Record of two Leaders of Labor: Henryk Erlich, born 1892; Victor Alter, born 1890; executed – December 1942* (New York: Erlich-Alter Memorial Conference, 1943).

⁴ George Sirgiovanni, *An Undercurrent of Suspicion: Anti-Communism in America during World War II* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1990), 179-85.

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intentions with “Vivas!” to Mexico they got involved in a brawl with the audience.

The violent confrontation was reported to have lasted some time until the police arrived and arrested those suspected of being the authors of the violent disturbance. When, according to *Excelsior*, weapons such as batons, pistols, and knives emerged, the president of the event, José Zacarías, had closed the meeting „so that no victims would have to be lamented“.⁵ According to this version of events, the blame for this incident rested firmly with the communists which had gathered in Mexico City during the previous years as refugees from the rise of fascist dictatorships across Europe.⁶ The transnational community of communists in exile in Mexico gathered around the *Sociedad de Amigos de la Unión de las Repúblicas Soviéticas Socialistas* (SAURSS, Society of Friends of the Soviet Union), and unsurprisingly its secretary general, Fausto Pomar, contradicted the account of *Excelsior*. In his view, the meeting to commemorate Erlich and Alter had been used „by the Trotskyists and other groups of enemies of the United Nations as a pretext to cause a scandal thereby to further the propaganda of Goebbels in order to create discord among the allied powers.“ On the night of 10th of March, the meeting’s president José Zacarías had

resorted to insults against the Red Army which produced indignation among the majority of those present who protested against the president’s statements with shouts of “Viva México!”, “Long live the allied forces!”, “Long live the Red Army!”, “Down with Hitler and Goebbels!”, “Down with the fifth column!”.

The ensuing brawl had been broken up by the police, and Pomar regarded it as „significant that the organizers had kept their plans secret from the authorities, which is understandable since the Mexican authorities never would have permitted an anti-Allied meeting in this democratic country.“⁷ Evidently, both parties of this conflict engaged in a blame game which tends to obscure the historical record, but it may well be that what is more significant about

5 “Escándalo de los Comunistas”, 4 [trans. A.R.].

6 From among the extensive literature on the general theme of left-wing political exile in Mexico since the late 1930s, see e.g.: Patricia W. Fagen, *Exiles and Citizens. Spanish Republicans in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) José Luis Abellán (ed.), *El Exilio Español de 1939*, 6 vols. (Madrid: Taurus, 1976-78); Francisco Caudet, *El Exilio Republicano de 1939* (Madrid: Edición Cátedra, 2005); Abdón Mateos, *La Batalla de México: final de la Guerra Civil y ayuda a los refugiados, 1939-1945* (Madrid: Alianza, 2009); Fritz Pohle, *Das mexikanische Exil. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politisch-kulturellen Emigration aus Deutschland (1937-1946)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986); from a politically more orthodox perspective: Wolfgang Kießling, *Alemania Libre in Mexiko. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des antifaschistischen Exils (1941-1946)*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1974).

7 “Una provocación contra la Unidad de los Aliados“, *Alemania Libre* 2:7 (México, D.F.), 1 Apr 1943, 4, signed for the Society of Friends of the Soviet Union by Fausto Pomar and Dr Enrique Arreguín Jr., 12 Mar 1943, [trans. A.R.].

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the night of the 10th March is its local position within the context of political culture and conflict among the transnational Left exiled in Mexico City at that time.

The local context of global politics

Recent historiography has approached the conflicts among the Left during the 1940s as a key ingredient to a more sophisticated understanding of the origins of the Cold War. The consolidation and successive alignment of the anti-Soviet Left with the hegemony of the United States have served as important reminders that this global conflict cannot be understood simply as a confrontation between East and West and simultaneously needs to be contextualized far better in the history of left-wing sectarianism since the late 1930s. This renewed interest in the origins and development of the Cold War is accompanied by a growing realization that the decade-long incubation of this conflict is probably best unlocked from a perspective of the periphery (such as the non-European theatres of global politics as well as the role of exiled communities) rather than from what used to be commonly understood as the geographical centers of international confrontation.⁸ The result is now a more diversified and de-centered perspective on the genesis of the confrontation between the two emerging super powers during the 1940s. During 1943, the politics of exile in Mexico City represented an interface of political practice across the international community of left-wingers in the city and the precarious nature of the anti-Hitler coalition. What remains to be done, therefore, is to place the events of 1943 accurately within their topographical context in Mexico City as well as within the chronology of events during the early months of 1943.⁹ This

⁸ Some of the most important recent contributions to this new perspective can be accessed in: Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney and Fabio Lanza (eds), *De-centering Cold War History: local and global change* (Abingdon / New York: Routledge, 2013); see also Marta Ruiz Galvete, “Cuadernos del Congreso por la Libertad: anticomunismo y guerra fría en América Latina”, *El Argonauta español [en ligne]* 3 (2006), <http://argonauta.revues.org/1095> (accessed 24 Mar 2015); Olga Glondys, *La Guerra Fría cultural y el exilio republicano español. “Cuadernos del Congreso por la Libertad de la Cultura” (1953-1965)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2012); Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: the cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), esp. ch. 1.

⁹ Such a localized approach to the history of exile in Mexico City has already been suggested by Michael Kenny, “Twentieth-century Spanish Expatriates in Mexico: an urban sub-culture”, *Anthropological Quarterly* 35:4 (1962), 169-80; see also Carlos Martínez Assad, “La Ciudad de los Inmigrantes”, in: Araceli Tinajero (ed.), *Exilio y cosmopolitanismo en el arte y la literatura hispánica* (Madrid: Verbum, 2013), 19-44; *El Exilio Español en la Ciudad de México. Legado Cultural*, ed. by Rafael Tovar y de Teresa (México D.F.: Gobierno de la Ciudad de México / Turner, 2010); Juan Carlos Pérez Guerrero, *La Identidad del Exilio republicano en México* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 2008), 174-81; Barry Carr, “Radicals, Revolutionaries, and Exiles: Mexico

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opens up a perspective of analysis that will focus on the precise local circumstances of political violence among the communities of exile in Mexico City during 1943 in order to read the events in the city as keystones to an emerging global ideological confrontation.¹⁰

Political violence was certainly not unheard of in Mexico during the first half of the 20th century. Since the revolutionary civil war of 1911 – 1920, state and society struggled to limit the role of violence in politics. It was not just the assassinations of some of the revolution’s main leaders such as Emiliano Zapata (1919), Venustiano Carranza (1920), Francisco „Pancho“ Villa (1923), or Álvaro Obregón (1928), that characterized the political culture of post-revolutionary Mexico, but also the extent to which violence had become an integral part of political discourse on a smaller scale – ranging from election fraud to brawls in public bars or open street fights. An incident such as the one reported in March 1943 would hardly have raised an eyebrow among those who were familiar with the day-to-day practices of political culture in post-revolutionary Mexico. In April 1939, shortly after the fall of Madrid, the decision of the Cárdenas administration to accept European left-wing refugees into the country added to this potential for political violence even before the arrival of large numbers of Spanish refugees following the republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish business community of Mexico City had openly celebrated the victory of Franco at the *Casino Español* at *Calle Isabel la Católica no. 29* on the 2nd of April which in turn provoked a violent attack against the Casino by Mexican trade unionists smashing the windows.¹¹ When on the following Sunday an unidentified voice disturbed guests at the restaurant „Pepín“ in *Calle de Bolívar no. 44* (directly upstairs from the legendary „Café Tupinamba“) with a shout of „Viva Franco!“, the result was a massive brawl that involved crockery and furniture as missiles. Among those detained for violent public disorder was the writer Octavio Paz who had subscribed to the Spanish republican cause throughout the Spanish Civil War.¹²

Against this backdrop of violent political conflict in Mexico City, the events of 1943 certainly do not stand out in terms of their violent nature but because of their location within

City in the 1920s”, *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies* (Fall 2010), 26-30; Jorge de Hoyos Puente, *La Utopía del Regreso. Proyectos de Estado y sueños de nación en el exilio republicano en México* (México, D.F.: Colegio de México, 2012), 156-69.

10 Cf. the brief references to the events of 1943 in Glondys, *La Guerra Fría cultural*, 38; Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, 19-21 and 45-6.

11 See the reports in *Excelsior*: (México, D.F.) “Se unirán en un solo centro los españoles residentes en México”, 3 Apr 1939, 1 & 3; “El Casino Español lapidado por unos obreros”, 5 Apr 1939, 2nd ed., 1 & 6.

12 “Gresca por un »Viva Franco«, *Excelsior* (México, D.F.), 10 Apr 1939, 2nd ed., 1 & 6.

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the social and political fabric of the city as well as because of their significance for the wider historical context of left-wing politics across the globe. The choice of venue for the meeting of 10th of March in memory of Erlich and Alter reveals the implicit purpose of the event within the political culture of exile in Mexico City. The *Bund* socialists had chosen the *Centro Cultural Israelita*, evidently emphasizing the fact that those two victims of Stalinism belonged to the most persecuted and endangered ethnic minority in Europe. The *Centro Cultural Israelita* was located in *Calle República de Cuba no. 81* just a few blocks north of the central plaza of Mexico City. It had only just moved to this location in January from its previous domicile in *Calle Tacuba no. 15* together with the *Comité Central Israelita en México*. The *Comité Central* had been founded in November 1938 in order to coordinate and represent the social and cultural life of the Jewish community and its network of charitable and cultural organizations.¹³ The *Comité* also liaised with other, non-Jewish organizations, and when a growing number of refugees from anti-Semitic persecutions in Europe arrived in Mexico, the *Comité* created the *Comité Pro-Refugiados* to support the refugees financially and to advise and help them in legal matters.¹⁴ The *Comité Central* officially emphasised its neutrality, especially in political matters so as not to upset the delicate balance of different factions within the Jewish community.

10 March 1943

The meeting organised by the *Bund* in March 1943 presented a challenge for the *Comité Central* even before it had taken place. The organizers had been granted access to the rooms of the *Centro Cultural*, but the *Comité Central* was only informed of this during one of its regular weekly meetings in the evening of Tuesday, 9th March, just 24 hours before the meeting was scheduled to take place. The minutes of the *Comité Central* record that the issue of the imminent commemoration of Erlich and Alter in the rooms of the *Centro Cultural* was raised by its president León Behar, not least because two representatives of the SAURSS, its secretary general Fausto Pomar and the financial secretary Victor Manuel Villaseñor, were joining the meeting to protest against the planned meeting. The presence of Villaseñor

¹³ Cf. Daniela Gleizer, “En Busca de la Unidad: historia del Comité Central Israelita en México, 1931-1945”, in: Shulamit Goldsmid and Natalia Gurvich (eds), *Sobre el Judaísmo Mexicano. Diversas expresiones de activismo comunitario* (México D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana, Departamento de Historia, Programa de Cultura Judaica, 2009), 217-56, who also briefly mentions the events at the Centro Cultural Israelita of 10 March, *ibid.*, 246.

¹⁴ Cf. León Sourasky, *Historia de la Comunidad Israelita de México, 1917-1942* (México D.F.: Moderna Printel, 1965), 229-55.

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indicates the importance that he attached to this issue: that same evening, he was, in fact, scheduled to appear at the inauguration of a public lecture series entitled „La Organización Económica y Política de la Unión Soviética“ that took place at the domicile of the SAURSS at *Calle Bolívar 57* every Tuesday night from 9th March.¹⁵ In their statement to the *Comité Villaseñor* and Pomar insisted that Erlich and Alter had been found guilty and executed as „fifth columnists“ and that there existed no reason to doubt the official explanation offered by the Soviet authorities. Since Mexico’s declaration of war against Germany in May 1942 the country was an ally of the Soviet Union, and Pomar and Villaseñor therefore asked the *Comité Central* to prevent the meeting from going ahead „at all cost“. Should the event take place, they added, „grave consequences for the *Comité Central* and the Jewish community“ might result, since „some trade unions would bring their followers to the meeting and there would be a scandal which might then be utilized by the reactionary press to propagate anti-Semitism.“¹⁶ This somewhat round-about argument to the effect that a commemoration of two Jewish victims of Stalinism might result in anti-Semitic attacks by the Mexican press provided only a feeble disguise for the message that the Society of Friends of the Soviet Union was prepared to disrupt the meeting with the help from among the Mexican unions. Tuvia Maizel represented the interests of the *Bund* socialists in the *Comité Central*.¹⁷ After the SAURSS representatives had left, he explained that the planned commemorative meeting was in no way directed against the Soviet Union.¹⁸ After some debate, the *Comité Central* recommended that Pomar and Villaseñor should contact Vicente Lombardo Toledano (the still-powerful ex-leader of the corporatist Mexican trade union, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM)) who, it was said, had not raised any objections to the event. If Pomar would still not be satisfied with the assurances that no attack against the Soviet

15 See the invitation at: State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Moscow, f. 5283: All-Union Society for Foreign Cultural Relations, op. 14, d. 144: Correspondence with the SAURSS about cultural relations, fol. 84. I am grateful for the collaboration and support of Ms Cordula Greinert conducting empirical research at Russian state archives in Moscow.

16 Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Comunidad Ashkenazi (CDICA), Actas del Comité Central Israelita de México, vol. 2, acta no. 219, 9 Mar 1943, 76rev. [trans. A.R.].

17 On Maizel’s role within the Mexican Jewish community and his relationship with the *Bund*, see Adina Cimet, *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 87-92.

18 On the conflict between the *Bund* socialists and communists, see Adina Cimet-Singer, “The last Battles of old-world Ideologies in the Race for Identity and Communal Power: Communists vs. Bundists vs. Zionists in Mexico, 1938-1951”, *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 5:2 (1994), <http://eial.tau.ac.il/index.php/eial/article/view/1215/1243> (accessed 18 Aug 2015); Alicia Gojman de Backal, *Generaciones Judías en México. La Kehilá Ashkenazi (1922-1992)* (México D.F.: Comunidad Ashkenazi de México, 1993), vol. VI, 53-61.

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Union would occur at the meeting, the *Comité Central* agreed to recommend to the *Bund* socialists to cancel the meeting and that all further responsibility in this matter would then rest with the organizers.¹⁹ Evidently, the *Comité Central* was eager to avoid any involvement with either side of the brewing conflict, and tried to send conciliatory signals to both parties by refusing to withdraw the permission to use the rooms of the *Centro Cultural Israelita* while simultaneously emphasizing that no public criticism of the Soviet authorities would take place.

Aside from these internal manoeuvres at the *Comité Central*, the timing of the planned event in the evening of 10th of March deserves closer attention. In January, the Mexican *Comité de Ayuda a Rusia en Guerra* (Aid Committee for Russia at War), which concerned itself with raising funds for the Soviet war effort, had celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Red Army which coincided with the Soviet victory at Stalingrad. Such celebrations of the Soviet armed forces enjoyed public prominence across Mexico City, for example on the 29th January when a celebratory dinner was held in the rooms of the *Centro Vasco* at Avenida Madero no. 6 in the historical city center, the home of the Basque community in Mexico City. The occasion saw international political and cultural celebrities in attendance, such as the Chilean consul Pablo Neruda, the German exiled writer Anna Seghers, or the Czech writer in exile Egon Erwin Kisch.²⁰ The reason why the *Comité Israelita* had suggested Vicente Lombardo Toledano as an authority on matters regarding the relationship with the Soviet Union was probably the fact that on 23rd February Lombardo had chaired another high-profile celebration in honour of the Red Army at the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*.²¹ These activities were no doubt closely coordinated by the Soviet embassy which had been established only shortly before, after Mexico and the Soviet Union had re-established their diplomatic relations which had been severed since 1930. In February 1943, the *Comité de Ayuda a Rusia en Guerra* also announced another event connected with these celebrations of allied comradeship which struck a slightly different chord: The bulletin *Ayuda a Rusia* advertised the „Noche Rusa de Carnaval“ (Russian Night of Carnival), a fiesta of Russian food, vodka, „fifty bottles of whisky“, and cigarillos of the brand „Timoshenko“, as well as a variety show of Russian culture performed by celebrities of the Mexican and international stage.²² Cultural diplomacy

19 CDICA, Actas del Comité Central Israelita de México, vol. 2, acta no. 219, 9 Mar 1943, 76rev-77.

20 *Ayuda a Rusia. Publicación mensual del "Comité de Ayuda a Rusia en Guerra"*, 2:5 (February 1943), 5.

21 See the report: "Mexico rinde homenaje al Ejército Rojo", in: *España Popular* 4:124 (México, D.F.), 24 Feb 1943, 4.

22 *Ibid.*, 2.

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and propaganda had become the preferred medium of Soviet efforts to construct and maintain a positive image of the Soviet Union in Mexico. The „Noche Rusa de Carnaval“ fitted into this pattern of deflecting potentially contentious politics in the direction of cultural advertising. The venue for this high-profile event of entertainment, which – with its steep ticket prices of 20 pesos – was meant to raise funds for the Soviet war effort, was the prestigious University Club of Mexico City on the grand boulevard of *Paseo de la Reforma no. 150*.

The advertised date of the „Noche Rusa de Carnaval“ was the evening of the 10th of March 1943, the very night that would see the violent confrontation at the *Centro Cultural Israelita* in *Calle República de Cuba*. It therefore seems unlikely that this day, a Wednesday, had been chosen by the *Bund* socialists (and confirmed with the *Comité Central* at extremely short notice) merely by accident as the date to commemorate the deaths of the Polish socialists Alter and Erlich. Instead, the local context of transnational politics in Mexico City suggests that the organisers had carefully picked a date and time when they could expect the pro-Soviet community of communists and their political allies to be engaged in a popular event of feasting and dancing at a prestigious location on *Paseo de la Reforma*, several kilometres removed from the *Centro Cultural Israelita* in the city center. The circumstances seem to indicate that the *Bund* socialists and their anti-Soviet audience were actively trying to avoid the attention or interference of the pro-Soviet faction in the city.

Long before the violent clashes at the *Centro Cultural Israelita* during that evening, such fears were not unfounded. Ever since the assassination of Leo Trotsky in 1940, the ongoing conflict between the communists and their anti-Stalinist detractors was poisoning the political climate among the transnational Left in the city which consisted mainly of European refugees.²³ An early foretaste of the communists’ readiness to confront and disrupt public events that displayed an anti-Soviet tendency among the Left in Mexico City was offered at the *Teatro Hidalgo* at *Calle Regina no. 52* in the south of the *Centro Histórico* on the night of 20th February 1941. A public meeting against „the bourgeoisie and imperialism“ had been organised by the Catalan trotskyist Julián Gorkín, the Mexican journalists Elvira Vargas and Gustavo de Anda, and the Mexican defence department official José Muñoz Cota. The event had attracted an audience of about 300 people, but instead of the announced speakers, three

23 On the context of exile and the anti-Stalinist Left in Mexico, see: Claudio Albertani, “Socialismo y Libertad. El exilio antiautoritario de Europa en México y la lucha contra el estalinismo (1940-1950)”, *Políticas de la Memoria* 8:9 (2008/09), 131-9.

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communist trade unionists took the stage and denounced the organisers as a „gang of spies and trotskyst provocateurs“. Meanwhile, the organisers disappeared and the meeting ended instead in „Vivas!“ to the Communist Party and the singing of the „International“. ²⁴ In January 1942, the communist paper *Voz de México* had published a caricature which has become notorious for its blunt display of sectarian aggression: The picture showed the decomposing head of Trotsky out of which grew a tree covered in swastikas with snakes for branches which were labelled with the names of Victor Serge, Marceau Pivert, Gustav Regler, Grandizo Munis, and Julián Gorkín. ²⁵ The caricature aimed at the editors of *Análisis*, a short-lived journal of the anti-Stalinist Left: Victor Serge (formerly Victor Lvovchich Kibalchich), a renegade veteran of the Russian revolution; Marceau Pivert, a French journalist and left-wing critic of the popular front government under Leon Blum; Gustav Regler, a German writer and former communist commissar of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War who had abandoned communism in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939; Grandizo Munis who during the Spanish Civil War had participated in the Trotskyite-anarchist uprising of May 1937, and Julián Gorkín, leading figure of the Spanish *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM). This group of five international anti-Stalinists in exile in Mexico became the core group of left-wing criticism of the Soviet Union. The message of the caricature in *Voz de México* contained a scarcely veiled threat to deal with this group of international „Trotskyists“ in the city in much the same way as was used to silence Trotsky himself. The group of Serge, Pivert, Regler, and Gorkín responded with a pamphlet that documented and condemned the Stalinist tactics of threats while quoting widespread international support for the anti-Stalinist Left. ²⁶ On the 10th March of the following year, Regler and Gorkín would be among those wounded and hospitalised after the violent brawl at the *Centro Cultural Israelita*. ²⁷ Serge’s excellent connections with the anti-Stalinist Left in New York were no doubt instrumental in coordinating the efforts to commemorate Erlich and Alter across the North-American continent. ²⁸

²⁴ See the report “Escandalazo en el Teatro Hidalgo” (undated), Archivo General de la Nación (AGN, Mexico), Archivo Presidencial Manuel Ávila Camacho, caja 1190, exp. 710.1/101-51, s. fol. [trans. A.R.].

²⁵ *La Voz de México* (México, D.F.), 25 Jan 1942, reprinted as evidence for the Stalinist tactics of threats in: Marceau Pivert, Gustav Regler, Victor Serge, Julián Gorkín, *¡La G.P.U. prepara un nuevo crimen!* (México, D.F.: Edición Análisis, 1942), 79.

²⁶ Pivert a.o., *La G.P.U. prepara*.

²⁷ According to Paul Merker, *Die Bewegung Freies Deutschland in Lateinamerika*, unpubl. ts., Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BAL), Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (SAPMO), Nachlaß Paul Merker, NY 4102/6, fol. 360.

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The culture of personalized attacks also prevailed during the weeks after the clashes at the *Centro Cultural Israelita* when all sides were trying to impose their version of events in public and behind the scenes. The report in *Excelsior* of the 12 of March had named some of the apparent main culprits. The paper ostensibly echoed the concerns of Jewish organizations in the city about the activities of „communist agents“ which potentially undermined the position of the „vast majority of foreign immigrants of all nationalities who have found generous asylum in Mexico.“ According to *Excelsior*, some leading figures of the Jewish community had identified those responsible as: „Bruno Frey [sic – recte: Frei], called Freudstadt [sic – recte: Freistadt], who is Austrian, not Polish; Leo Katz, Romanian; Leo Zuckermann, German, who under the name of Leo Lambert belongs to the “Menorah”, an organization of Jews, and José Anbinder.“ The conclusion to be drawn from the events appeared clear: „This unexpected collaboration of communists implicated in the hardly democratic task of preventing an act of protest and mourning shows, according to the judgement of the leaders of the Jewish organizations, the secret hand of the agents of the USSR.“²⁹ Even if the event of the 10th March was dedicated to the memory of victims of Stalinism and those in attendance were predominantly foreigners, the charge of disrupting public order and interfering with free speech could potentially be seen as an act of disloyalty to the Mexican host nation and entail deportation. So it comes as no surprise that the immediate reply by the leaders of the SAURSS, Fausto Pomar and their press secretary Enrique Arraguín, tried to characterise the commemorative meeting itself as a disloyal act to undermine the alliance between Mexico and the USSR. Their version contained similarly personalized attacks against the meeting’s president José Zacarías, whom they accused of insulting the Red Army, and against others – „among them the known trotskyist Enrique Gutmann and Mr Max Diamant [...]“.³⁰ Gutmann and Diamant had been leading members of the *Liga Pro-Cultura Alemana*, a non-sectarian organization of German-speaking anti-fascist refugees in Mexico, by this time all but defunct.³¹ The conflict over the correct interpretation of events had begun.

28 Alan Wald, “Victor Serge y la izquierda antiestalinista de New York”, *Políticas de la Memoria* 8:9 (2008/09), 141-8; see also Id., “Victor Serge and the New York anti-Stalinist Left”, in: *The Ideas of Victor Serge. A Life as a work of art*, ed. by Susan Weissman, special edition of *Critique*, 28-9 (1997), 99-117.

29 “Escándalo de los Comunistas”, 4 [trans. A.R.]. Leo Katz was the father of the Austrian historian Friedrich Katz.

30 “Una provocación contra la Unidad”, 4 [trans. A.R.].

31 On the *Liga Pro-Cultura Alemana* and its role during the political conflicts of the early 1940s, see: Pohle, *Das mexikanische Exil*, 83-200.

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At its first meeting after the events of the 10th March, the *Comité Central Israelita* found itself in the delicate position of having to deal with the fallout from the violent clashes which had occurred on its premises the previous week. At the beginning of the meeting of 16th March, in an act not uncharacteristic of bodies of collective responsibility after something has gone terribly wrong, the committee members Block, Drucker, and Meyer went on record to point out that they had opposed the meeting in memory of Alter and Erlich all along.³² Paul Drucker represented the association of German-speaking Jews *Menorah* which maintained close relations with the German communists in Mexico, while Block's position may also be illustrated by the fact that his wife María Luisa Cabrera de Block had acted as the secretary of the organising committee of the „Noche Rusa de Carnaval“ at the University Club.³³ The report in *Excelsior* of the previous week had placed the *Comité Central* (which, according to the paper, would „meet again next week to decide whether to take legal action against certain immigrants who are international agents“³⁴) in a difficult position at the center of a political power struggle between the different factions. This conflict also threatened to affect the relationship between the different Jewish organisations represented at the meeting.

The *Comité Central* had received two letters: the first was signed by Bruno Frei, Leo Zuckermann and Leo Katz (German-speaking communists in exile who had been identified by *Excelsior* as the main culprits), who explained to the *Comité Central* their motives for „preventing by force that a meeting was held in memory of Alter and Erlich which was organized by the group *Bund* last Wednesday“; the second contained a complaint by the *Menorah* (to which Frei, Zuckermann, and Katz belonged) over why the *Comité Central* „had not taken appropriate measures to prevent the meeting“ in the first place.³⁵ During the ensuing debate, León Behar explained that Fausto Pomar of the SAURSS had agreed to letting the meeting proceed, but that it had nevertheless descended into violent clashes. Tuvia Maizel, who represented the *Bund* socialists in the *Comité Central*, criticised the letter of the *Menorah* and insisted that the Mexican unions had not been involved in the violent break-up of the meeting, but that instead the signatories of the first letter were to blame for the incident.³⁶

32 CDICA, Actas del Comité Central Israelita, vol. 2, acta no. 220, 16 Mar 1943, 77-77rev.

33 See: *Ayuda a Rusia*. 2:5 (México, D.F., Feb 1943), 2; on the relationship of the *Menorah* with the German-speaking community of communists in exile in Mexico, see: David Bankier, "Los exiliados alemanes en México y sus vínculos con la comunidad judía (1942-1945)", *Judaica Latinoamericana. Estudios históricos-sociales* 1, (1988), 79-89.

34 "Escándalo de los Comunistas", 4 [trans. A.R.].

35 CDICA, Actas del Comité Central Israelita, vol. 2, acta no. 220, 16 Mar 1943, 78-78rev [trans. A.R.].

36 Ibid., 78rev. [trans. A.R.].

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Drucker, representing the *Menorah*, asked who were the authors of the report in *Excelsior* which had put heavy blame on „communist agents“, to which Maizel replied, the *Bund* socialists would not possess this information, but nevertheless he knew the information contained in the article had originated from „persons who have nothing to do with the Jewish community or with the *Bund*“ and that his organisation protested against the contents of the article. For the time being, it seemed that the two organisations would be satisfied with such declarations, and the *Comité Central* agreed to ignore both letters.³⁷ Evidently, the *Comité Central* was trying its utmost to maintain its neutrality in the matter and to ignore the political pressure that resulted from the report in *Excelsior*.

If the *Comité Central* had hoped to have laid the matter to rest, however, such hopes were soon disappointed. During the next meeting of 23rd March, committee member Grünstein felt it necessary to have it minuted that he was the first to have protested privately as well as among the *Bund* socialists against the report of *Excelsior* of the 12th March.³⁸ Meanwhile, Paul Drucker on behalf of the *Menorah* insisted on a written response to their original letter. The committee agreed on a response to the effect that it had undertaken everything possible to prevent the commemoration of Erlich and Alter from going ahead and that they knew „from a most trustworthy source“ that the authors of the report in *Excelsior* were not the organizers of the meeting „and much less so collaborators of the *Comité Central*“, and that the committee would investigate the origin of the report and inform the *Menorah* about the result.³⁹ Three weeks later, on 13th April, it was the *Bund* socialists who petitioned the *Comité Central* once again and demanded that the committee publicly denounce the letter signed by Frei, Zuckermann, and Katz which accused the organizers of the meeting of 10th March of being „fifth columnists“. ⁴⁰ By now, the patience of the *Comité* was evidently exhausted, and the matter was resolved by returning the original letter by Zuckermann, Frei, and Katz to its authors with the remark that „the *Comité Central* could not take it into account.“⁴¹ This appears to have marked the end of the involvement of the *Comité Central* which did everything possible to keep both parties at arm's length in order to maintain

37 Ibid., 78rev-79 [trans. A.R.].

38 CDICA, Actas del Comité Central Israelita, vol. 2, acta no. 221, 23 Mar 1943, 80 [trans. A.R.].

39 Ibid., 80rev. [trans. A.R.].

40 CDICA, Actas del Comité Central Israelita, vol. 2, acta no. 223, 13 Apr 1943, 82. [trans. A.R.].

41 Ibid., 83rev. [trans. A.R.].

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its primary function as a coordinating committee for all parts of the Jewish community in the city.

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The fact that the *Comité Central* managed to avoid any further involvement may also have to do with the fact that elsewhere in the city the violent confrontation between the anti-Stalinist Left and the communists had been taken to another level. Three weeks after the violent break-up of the meeting of 10th March, the organisers intended to repeat their attempts of alerting the public to the fate of Henryk Erlich, Victor Alter, and the Italian-born US-American trade unionist Carlos Tresca. By including the latter, who had been shot dead in the center of Manhattan on 11th January, the focus of the anti-Stalinist campaign had shifted and took on a broader scope of anti-communism among the global trade union movement. While it is now assumed that the killing was the work of the Mafia, the case was never officially resolved, and this gave rise to speculations that the NKVD might have had a hand in his death since Tresca was known for his outspoken criticism of the Soviet Union.⁴²

Again, the choice of date and venue appears significant when analysing the events of Thursday, the 1st April, in order to place the political practice of exile in Mexico City precisely within its topographical and chronological context. If in March the circumstances indicated that the anti-Stalinists had tried to avoid the attention of the communist community of exile, on 1st April the commemoration of Tresca, Alter, and Erlich took on a different character. The reason for this is the choice of venue: the *Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano* at *Calle Venustiano Carranza no. 50* in the south of the city’s *Centro Histórico*. In October 1939, after the republican defeat during the Spanish Civil War, the Mexican branch of the Spanish *Frente Popular* had been transformed into the *Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano* which moved into the building in December 1939.⁴³ It also served as a meeting place for the *Asociación de Inmigrantes Españoles* during the difficult first months of the influx of Spanish refugees.⁴⁴ Some time later, the building became the home of the anarcho-syndicalist *Delegación de la*

42 See e.g.: *Homenaje a Tresca*, p.5; *Mundo – Socialismo y Libertad* 1 (México D.F., June 1943), 12; cf. Dorothy Gallagher, *All the right Enemies. The life and murder of Carlos Tresca* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, 21.

43 “El Frente Popular Español se ha transformado”, *Iberia. Portavoz de la colonia española anti-fascista* 1:21 (México, D.F.), 18 Oct 1939, 8; “Nuevo local para el Centro Cultural”, *ibid.*, 1:23, 1 Dec 1939, 8.

44 See, e.g., the report about a meeting on 12 February 1940: AGN, Secretaría de Gobernación (galería 2), Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS), caja 315, exp. 10, fols 59-61.

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Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT) en México, a branch of the Spanish anarchist trade union movement in exile who installed the offices of their journal *Solidaridad Obrera* on the first floor and used the location as a regular meeting place for their activists.⁴⁵ In March 1943, *Solidaridad Obrera* had commented sarcastically on the incident at the *Centro Cultural Israelita*.⁴⁶ Finally, the building also hosted the transnational movement *Socialismo y Libertad*, an anti-Stalinist group under the direction of Serge, Pivert, Regler, and Gorkín who also acted as president of the cultural commission of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*.⁴⁷ As far as the evening of the 1st April 1943 is concerned, it may be of interest that on the same evening the Spanish CNT had scheduled one of their weekly discussion meetings, the “Jueves de Solidaridad Obrera”, to take place in the same building from 8pm. That evening’s speaker was Jaime Aragó, anarchist activist from Barcelona, on „Experiencias de la Guerra y la Revolución“. ⁴⁸ It appears that after the unsuccessful attempt to motivate the Jewish community into a commitment to the anti-Stalinist cause, the anti-Stalinist group now intended to hold another meeting in memory of the (in Tresca’s case: perceived) victims of Stalinism in order to mobilise the Spanish anarchists into a united front against the communists.

On 1st of April 1943, the meeting in memory of Tresca, Alter, and Erlich attracted an unwelcome audience.⁴⁹ According to a later report by the *Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano*, which proudly claimed the participation of „liberal and socialist Spaniards who fought until the last moment against Franco“, the venue saw „activists saved from all concentration camps of Europe and distinguished members of the Jewish community in Mexico.“ The event was scheduled to begin at 9pm, but already at 8pm a group of about a hundred communists, armed with sticks, rattles, daggers, and pistols, is said to have attacked the building where no more than thirty persons had been present.⁵⁰ While breaking the door, the attackers had injured

45 See their article on the *Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano* and the impressum of *Solidaridad Obrera* 1:2 (México, D.F.), 20 May 1942, 2.

46 “Un gesto ‘heroico’ de los comunistas”, *Solidaridad Obrera* 2:22 (México, D.F.), 20 Mar 1943, 4.

47 *Homenaje a Tresca*, 12. Later that year, the group edited their journal *Mundo* from this address; cf. *Mundo* 1:1 (México, D.F.), 15 Jun 1943, 32.

48 See: *Solidaridad Obrera* 2:19 (México, D.F.), 6 Feb 1943, 4.

49 The events of 1 April 1943 have already briefly been mentioned by Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge. The course is set on hope* (London / New York: Verso, 2001), 180-1; Jonathan Miles, *The Nine Lives of Otto Katz* (London: Bantam, 2010), 251; Glondys, *La Guerra Fría*, 38; Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, 21 & 45-6; see also the eyewitness account of Serge’s daughter Jeannine Kibalchich, “My Father”, in: *The Ideas of Victor Serge*, 12; cf. the report by TIME MAGAZINE as quoted in Gallagher, *All the right Enemies*, 242-3.

50 Cf. Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, 266, who quotes widely differing reports of the number of people present which may also reflect the presence of the CNT activists in the house.

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Enrique Adroher Gironella, former member of the Central Committee of the *Milicias* in Catalonia. Once inside, the report continued, the attackers had started to vandalise the building, and many injuries were reported on both sides, but „fortunately, they met with an active and lively resistance“ when the fighting spread through the house. The defenders were able to erect a barricade in front of one of the rooms to protect the lives of the speakers whom the attackers had wanted to lynch on orders of their leaders. Julián Gorkín was reported to have been among those injured. Among the attackers, the defenders of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano* recognized „a number of Stalinist *pistoleros* with orders to gun down some of the activists who were inside the house“. The organizers of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*, however, had warned the police in advance, and they arrived early enough „to prevent murder.“⁵¹ The attackers, so the report went on, had been gathering in the area around the house since 7pm drinking and being „shepherded“ by paramilitaries from the Spanish and Mexican communist parties. Parts of the group of attacking communists, „agitators of both sexes“, so reported the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*, had taken the conflict into the street where they tried to incite passers-by against what they called a meeting of „fifth columnists“. The whole incident appeared to have been well-organised by the attacking communists, with a number of cars ready to take the injured to hospital.⁵² The FBI seems to have observed the situation and counted among the attackers the Spaniards Antonio Mije, leader of the PCE in Mexico, Juan Comorera, Julián Carrillo, and Carlos Contreras, who was, in reality, the Italian Vittorio Vidali, veteran commander of the Spanish Civil War and in Mexico partner of Tina Modotti.⁵³ Jonathan Miles has used the FBI file of the Czech refugee Otto Katz, commonly known under his *nom de plume* André Simone, to identify him as one of the figures in the background who stayed behind at a nearby café to receive constant reports about the ongoing battle at the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*, together with his „cronies“ (as Miles prefers to call them), the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer and the Hungarian sociologist László Radványi, the husband of Anna Seghers.⁵⁴ The café in question was reported to have been located next to the Hotel “Avenida” which occupied the no. 38 of *Avenida San Juan de Letrán* (today: *Eje Central Lázaro Cárdenas*), about two blocks west of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*.⁵⁵ In spite of the organized

51 *Homenaje a Tresca, Alter y Ehrlich*, 11-2 [trans. A.R.].

52 Ibid. [trans. A.R.].

53 Cf. Weissman, *Victors Serge.*, 180-1; Glondys, *La Guerra Fría cultural*, 38.

54 Miles, *The Nine Lives*, 251.

55 Cf. the files of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City: United States National Archives (College Park, MD), Record Group 84 (State Department Foreign Service Posts), UD 2894 (General Records of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, 1937-49), vol. 310: 820.02 Gibson (Sep.-Dec. 1943), personal dossier on “Katz, Otto” (22 Sep

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efforts by a transnational group of communists, the organizers claimed, the commemorative event to honour Tresca, Alter, and Erlich had eventually proceeded „in total tranquility, with all the dignity required for a mournful commemoration“, if only with a delay of about an hour. The report emphasized that all speakers, among them the leadership of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*, the journalist Jacobo Abrams, the CNT leader Emilio Maldonado, a representative of the *Bund* named Kristal, and Victor Serge „paid tribute to the brave soldiers of the Red Army who are defending the life and future of the Russian people whilst the crimes of the G.P.U. are stabbing the honour of their country in the back.“⁵⁶ Other sources had reported that the meeting needed to be suspended – it seems that not even some of the basic facts of the events of the 1st April 1943 could be agreed upon in the wake of political violence in the *Centro Histórico* of Mexico City.⁵⁷

The organizers of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano* were eager to dispel accusations that were soon raised in the communist press during the first days of April to the effect that the meeting had allowed pro-Fascist manifestations and displayed disloyalty to the Allied cause against Hitler.⁵⁸ Their efforts were echoed by the Spanish anarchists of the CNT. A short notice in their journal *Solidaridad Obrera* accused „various assault units of the communist party, consisting of Mexican elements under the direction of the Spanish communists who, as always, did not possess the dignity to show their faces“ of the violent attack and damage to the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano*.⁵⁹ The most shocking aspect of the incident, the Spanish anarchists continued two weeks later, was that Mexico guaranteed the freedom of speech to all while the communists seemed eager to deny this right to all who were not prepared to submit to the slogans of their party. They rejected the communist charge of „Trotskyism“ and saw the communists „in conflict with the elementary pre-conditions of spiritual life without which life is not worth living. May the whole world take notice of this. Particularly the Spanish.“ However, the Spanish *Cenetistas* who had found themselves in the middle of the violent clashes made it clear that they would not be drawn into this conflict: they regarded Stalinists

1943), 8. According to “a reliable and confidential source”, Leo Zuckermann also formed part of this group which was described here as “the high command of the Communist party”.

56 *Homenaje a Tresca, Alter y Ehrlich*, 13 [trans. A.R.].

57 Cf. e.g. Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, 46, quoting the pro-Soviet paper *El Popular* (México D.F.): “Incidente provocado por unos conocidos Trotskistas”, 2 Apr 1943; cf. also other reports quoted by Iber: “Escandalosa trifulca en el Centro Cultural Ibero-Mexicano por un atraco comunista”, *La Prensa* (México, D.F.), 2 Apr 1943, 23; “Fueron 73 los detenidos en el incidente comunista”, *El Universal Gráfico* (México, D.F.), 2 Apr 1943, 3.

58 *Homenaje a Tresca, Alter y Ehrlich*, 13-4.

59 “Gran Mitin de Protesta”, *Solidaridad Obrera* 2:23 (México, D.F.), 3 April 1943, 3 [trans. A.R.].

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and Trotskyists as „two sides of the same coin“, and rejected any suggestion of solidarity with either side. The former, so they explained, had won the contest over political power in the Soviet Union, and the latter turned in vain against the consequences of their defeat. „But in Russia the Trotskyites have killed anarchists and destroyed the opportunity of a progressive development of the revolution that was murdered by the communist party. Therefore, there does not exist any fundamental difference [between them].“⁶⁰ Evidently, the Spanish anarchists did not need any lessons in anti-Communism, and above all, they refused to accept it from any renegades of the Russian Revolution who had ended up in Mexico. The Spanish communists, however, reiterated their charge of pro-Fascist complicity of the anti-Stalinist Left which allegedly undermined the Allied war effort to eradicate Nazism. More specifically, they denied any involvement in the violent incident of 1st April: „The Spanish communists had nothing whatsoever to do with what occurred at the [Centro] Ibero-Mexicano, besides, the Mexican people has no need at all for the Spanish to break up criminal provocations by its enemies and to settle accounts with spies and Trotskyists saboteurs.“⁶¹ Evidently, the confrontation among the exiled Left in Mexico City had reached a stalemate of irreconcilable positions towards the exercise of free speech versus an unquestioning loyalty towards the USSR.

The chronological context of the two events that caused so much public disorder and ignited polarized political strife in the local public must be seen in terms of the wider geopolitical implications of the first half of 1943. The conflict between the communists and the anti-Stalinist Left had been going on for years, but what shaped and fuelled their mutual animosity in Mexico City in early 1943 was the Battle of Stalingrad, in other words: the turn of tides on the European Eastern Front. The Soviets had gained confidence in the eventual victory over Nazi-Germany and were able to establish their official presence in the city as brothers-in-arms with the support from a multitude of committees and associations that displayed their allegiance to the USSR across national and political milieus. As it now seemed more likely that the Red Army would go on the offensive against the German army, the fate of Eastern European nations such as Poland attracted renewed interest, not the least among the anti-Stalinist Left which chose to highlight the cases of Victor Alter and Henryk Erlich that had caused much indignation earlier in New York.⁶² The wave of protest from liberal and anti-

60 "Los comunistas contra la libertad", *Solidaridad Obrera* 2:24 (México, D.F.), 17 Apr 1943, 4 [trans. A.R.].

61 "Espías que defienden espías", *España Popular* 4:131 (México, D.F.), 9 Apr 1943, 1-2 [trans. A.R.].

62 See: Sirgiovanni, *An Undercurrent of Suspicion*, 180-3.

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Soviet socialist camps can be seen as echoes of a strategic contest over the future of Poland. And this conflict over the expected Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe left its traces in the streets of Mexico City. The events of spring 1943 also coincided with the formal dissolution of the Comintern which had been de facto defunct for some years. After the events in the *Centro Histórico* of Mexico City it comes as no surprise that, just a few weeks later, the movement *Socialismo y Libertad* around Serge, Gorkín, Pivert, and Regler dedicated one of the first pages of the first number of their new journal *Mundo* to the dissolution of the Comintern, expressing fundamental doubt as to whether this act of concession by Stalin toward the western powers would have any tangible effects on the global dimension of what they regarded as the totalitarian threat of Stalinism.⁶³

Aftermath

The longer-term impact and the memory of these incidents of political violence in Mexico City during March/April 1943 were clearly subject to the unfolding context of the Cold War and the internal realignments of the communist camp after 1945. In autumn 1946, Leo Zuckermann – identified three years earlier by *Excelsior* as one of the leaders of public disorder at the *Centro Cultural Israelita* – and Ludwig Renn, former president of the communist-inspired *Movimiento Alemania Libre* (Movement of Free Germany) in Mexico, found it necessary to refute publicly allegations that had been made against them in *Novedades* during September 1946. In a series of articles about „an extensive network of Soviet societies in Mexico“, Karl Rienffer had denounced the pro-communist politics of associations such as *Alemania Libre* and the *Federación de Organizaciones de Ayuda a los Republicanos Españoles* (Federation of Aid Organizations for Spanish Republicans - FOARE). Zuckermann’s and Renn’s reply „in defence against a defamation“ stated among other details that „it is false that Dr. Zuckermann had participated directly or indirectly in presumed acts of assault.“⁶⁴ Given that Zuckermann himself together with Frei and Leo Katz had explained in writing to the *Comité Central Israelita* in March 1943 his motives for „preventing by force that a meeting was held in memory of Alter and Erlich which was organized by the group *Bund*“⁶⁵, his denial three years later was clearly motivated by

63 “La Tercera Internacional”, *Mundo – Socialismo y Libertad*, no. 1 (México D.F.), Jun 1943, 3; Gustavo de Anda acted as *gerente*, and the journal also reiterated the commemoration of Tresca, Alter and Erlich: *ibid*, 12-3.

64 „Abwehr einer Verleumdung“, *Demokratische Post* 4:4 (Mexico, D.F.), 1 Oct 1946, 2 [trans. A.R.].

65 CDICA, Actas del Comité Central Israelita, vol. 2, acta no. 220, 16 Mar 1943, 78-78rev [trans. A.R.].

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circumstance rather than by historical accuracy. The autumn of 1946 saw the end of the era of post-revolutionary presidents in Mexico when Manuel Ávila Camacho prepared to hand over power to president-elect Miguel Alemán Valdés representing a new generation that would steer Mexico firmly into the western camp of the Cold War. The rise of north-American anti-communism obscured the legacy of the anti-Hitler coalition which the communists had found necessary to defend against a „fifth column“ of „Trotskyists“. And since both Renn and Zuckermann were at the time waiting for their return to the Soviet occupation zone of Germany, any public mention of them as communist trouble makers must have had a detrimental effect on their attempts to obtain transit visa to the U.S. – at this point, they had already been waiting to return home for one-and-a-half years, and the Soviet Union had begun to return European communists on board of cargo ships across the Pacific to Vladivostok. Rienffer, incidentally, became a public voice of Francoist anti-communism during the early 1950s when the bilateral military cooperation between the U.S. and the fascist regime in Spain attracted strong criticism from the Left. The legacy of communist organizations in exile in Mexico figured prominently in his contributions to legitimize this Spanish-American partnership of anti-communist convenience.⁶⁶ The history of left-wing exile in Mexico had thereby entered the ideological confrontation of the Cold War.

About twenty years later, the events of 1943 re-surfaced in an altogether different and unexpected context. Paul Merker, the leader of the German communists in Mexico, had returned to Germany in 1946 and was elected to the Executive Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). In 1950, however, he was expelled from the party and from 1952 to 1956 imprisoned as a „western agent“ and „pro-Zionist“ because of his war-time cooperation with Jewish organisations and his advocacy of restitution of plundered Jewish property. After his release from prison, he was readmitted to the party but hoped in vain for a full rehabilitation.⁶⁷ Possibly as part of his frustrated efforts, in 1965 Merker produced a narrative account of more than 500 pages about his activities during his years in exile in

66 See e.g. Karl Rienffer, *Comunistas españoles en América* (Madrid: Edición Nacional, 1953), esp. 187-96.

67 The case of Merker and the motif of anti-Semitism during the late-Stalinist purges have been extensively covered – see e.g.: Jeffrey Herf, *East German Communists and the Jewish Question: the case of Paul Merker* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1994); Id., *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the two Germanies* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 103-61; see also: Gerd Koenen, “Die DDR und die ‘Judenfrage’. Paul Merker und der nicht stattgefundene ‚deutsche Slánský-Prozeß‘ 1953“, in: Leonid Luks (ed.), *Der Spätstalinismus und die “Jüdische Frage”. Zur antisemitischen Wendung des Kommunismus* (Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 1998), 237-70; Wolfgang Kießling: “‘Wiedergutmachung am jüdischen Volke’. Paul Merkers politische Vorstellungen aus dem Jahr 1942-45 und der Merker-Prozeß des Jahres 1955“, *Exil* 12:2 (1992), 67-76; Id.: *Paul Merker in den Fängen der Sicherheitsorgane Stalins und Ulbrichts* (Berlin: Forscher- und Diskussionskreis DDR-Geschichte, 1995).

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Mexico, and it is in this context that the violent clashes at the *Centro Cultural Israelita* on 10th March 1943 played a minor but significant role.⁶⁸ His account was evidently based on the response of Fausto Pomar and Enrique Arreguin to the initial report of the incident in *Excelsior*.⁶⁹ Merker used his own involvement in the confrontation (he used the pronoun „us“) to prove his loyalty to the party line at the time when the anti-Stalinist „Trotskyists“ had been identified as the main threat to the anti-Hitler coalition. Not without pride he recalled:

On 10th March 1943 [Heinrich] Gutmann and [Max] Diamant organized a public and anti-Soviet “commemoration” of Ehrlich [i.e. Henryk Erlich] and Adler [i.e. Victor Alter] who were convicted as spies in the Soviet Union. They acted in the name of a so-called Jewish Federation [the *Bund*] in the hall of calle de Tacuba no. 81. [sic! – recte: Calle República de Cuba no. 81] Apart from Gutmann and Diamant were present Serge, Gorkin, Pivert, Regler, Feuchtwanger, Friedemann as well as Öttinghaus and his circle. But the hall was predominantly occupied by us and our Jewish friends. Members of the Mexican Society of Friends of the Soviet Union and some Spanish comrades had come, too. When the chairman of the event in his opening address directed attacks against the Red Army, the brawl started. Within just a few minutes the hall was cleansed of the Trotskyists and the commemoration therefore had come to an end. Regler and Gorkin had to seek medical treatment.⁷⁰

Given Merker’s earlier fall from grace because of his alleged „pro-Zionist“ sympathies, it is telling how twenty years later he carefully pointed out the presence of Jews on both sides of the confrontation (Pomar and Arreguin had not mentioned this at the time). He also failed to mention that the location of this incident was, in fact, the *Centro Cultural Israelita* (while misremembering the address). In this way, Merker portrayed the conflict not so much as a question of pro- or anti-Jewish attitudes (which had been his undoing in the early 1950s), but as a struggle against the „Trotskyists“ *Bund* socialist in accordance with the party line. Once more, the memory of political violence among the Left in Mexico City during 1943 was subjected to tactical considerations, as Merker’s report reveals much about his own difficulties with explaining his role in exile in the light of changing ideological priorities after the war. In his case as in others, it was a matter of historical circumstance which details entered the narrative of memory.

68 BAL SAPMO, Nachlaß Paul Merker, NY 4102/5-6: *Die Bewegung Freies Deutschland in Lateinamerika*; this unpublished typescript may have served as preparation for his later published 60-page account: Paul Merker, „Über die Bewegung ‚Freies Deutschland‘ in Lateinamerika“, in: *Im Kampf bewährt. Erinnerungen deutscher Genossen an den antifaschistischen Widerstand von 1933-1945*, ed. by Heinz Voßke (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1969), 465-526; this later, published account does not, however, mention the events of March 1943.

69 “Una provocación contra la Unidad de los Aliados”, 4.

70 Merker, *Die Bewegung Freies Deutschland*, fol. 360 [trans. A.R.].

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The violent incidents of March/April 1943 among the transnational Left in Mexico City represent an excellent opportunity for demonstrating the intersection of global politics and local political practice. On both occasions, the organisers of the commemorative meetings for Erlich, Alter (and in April, Tresca) sought to use the time and location of their events to involve other parts of the urban public in the ongoing ideological conflict: in March, the events at the Centro Cultural Israelita were bound to cause heated debates among the Jewish community while the date evidently was meant to deflect the attention of the pro-Soviet faction in the city towards their „Noche Rusa de Carnaval“ in another part of the city. In April, the location of the *Centro Ibero-Mexicano* challenged the communist hegemony among the Left deliberately close to the home of the SAURSS in the *Centro Histórico* while the Spanish anarchists of the CNT responded with long-standing anti-communist resentment that had originated during the Spanish Civil War. On both occasions, however, it appears that the intended anti-communist mobilization all but failed: the *Comité Central Israelita* refused to be drawn into the conflict on either side while the Spanish anarchists rejected Trotzkyists, POUM activists, and Bolshevik renegades just as much. The pro-Soviet Communists, confident of their support among the Mexican trade unions, had responded to both events with violent attacks only to find themselves at the receiving end of increasingly hostile local publicity which led to a more defensive approach during the remaining years of the war. European Communists exiled in Mexico were soon eager to dissociate themselves from the events in order to avoid any conflict with the Mexican authorities. After the last Stalinist purges of the early 1950s, the memory of the confrontation in Mexico City of 1943 could again serve as proof of communist loyalty – which, however, tells us more about East Berlin during the 1960s than about Mexico City in 1943. In any case, it is the close analysis of the local and chronological context of these events that leads to a better understanding of the confrontation between the unsuccessful attempts by anti-Soviet socialists to build broader anti-Communist alliances and the communists' display of political violence in the streets and buildings of the city center which turned out to be less than helpful in promoting the anti-Hitler coalition. In this way, local and global politics can be read as a texture of political practice in a local environment and provide important insights into how the characteristic asymmetries of the global post-war confrontation were rehearsed in peripheral theatres such as the politics in exile in Mexico City in 1943.