H. Repression Against the POUM

(Thematic Correspondence to Chapter Eleven)

One of the consequences of the May events was the repression of the Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) by the new Republican Government led by Juan Negrín. Its local offices were closed, its press was shut down, and many of its members were incarcerated. The repression culminated with the assassination of its most important leader, Andreu Nin, and the trial against the party in October 1938. The letter printed here, written from Barcelona’s state prison by important POUM leaders, denounces the subjection of the organisation’s members, the slander coming from the Communist Party, and the interference of the Soviets, who hoped to stage a show trial against the party.

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(From a typed letter found in the General Archives of the Civil War, Salamanca: ‘Presos del POUM’, document B 1568.)

State prison, Barcelona

14 July 1938

The Honourable President of the Republic
The Honourable President of the Government
The Honourable President of the Cabinet
The Honourable President of the Generalitat and of the Basque Country
To the Committees of the Anti-fascist Organisations and Parties,
We the undersigned, long-time militants in the workers’ movement and founders and leaders of the POUM, have already suffered imprisonment for thirteen months. We were arrested on 16 June 1937. Two days earlier we had received a verbal promise from Mr. Julián Zugazagoitia, then Minister of Interior, that the matter of the suspension of our newspaper, *La Batalla*, would be addressed, and, if possible, resolved at the cabinet meeting on 18 June. The minister added: ‘If it were my choice, I would authorise the publication of the newspaper tomorrow’. There was no time to address the matter, and there was an attempt to prevent the Editor in Chief of *La Batalla* from appearing freely, with the executive committee’s consent, before Barcelona’s popular tribunal #1 in order to respond to the wicked accusations that have been hurled upon us. The absolution, which seemed inevitable, would have completely shattered the plot the Communist Party has been preparing for months in order to destroy our party. The police agents obedient to the Communist Party came expressly from Madrid and Valencia to unleash relentless repression against the POUM. Any POUM militants and sympathisers that could be found were arrested as ‘fascist spies’. For example, at the very moment that a fascist bullet on the Eastern front was putting an end to the life of Commander Cahué, a member of our central committee, he was being hunted down as a ‘fascist spy’. All of our offices and social centres have been raided, as have some of our private residences, from which objects of value have disappeared: typewriters, fountain pens, clothes, even soap and cologne… Our publishing house, ‘Editorial Marxista’, has been confiscated and sold off for virtually nothing, the principal works of Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Kautsky and Bebel branded as ‘Trotskyist’. These acts were the prelude of what was going to happen next. The repression was going to be bloody – and it was, calculated and bloody.

Andrés [Andreu] Nin was kidnapped and assassinated by soldiers when he was in prison in Alcalá de Henares. We have the right to say that he was assassinated until those responsible for jailing him can prove otherwise. Months later, the Austrian Marxist writer, Kurt Landau, was kidnapped in Barcelona. He has not reappeared: surely, he too has been assassinated. Meanwhile, the brother of our government representative Joaquín Maurín lies dying in a hospital bed, watched over by two policemen, and Maurín himself is a prisoner in Zaragoza or Salamanca. Shortly afterwards, a long-time worker militant and one of the combatants in the heroic days of the militia, our Commissar Marciano Mena, was executed in Lérida. Months later, on the Eastern front, two of our long-time members, Hervás and Trepat, the former a nephew of ex-Commissar General and government representative Crescenciano Bilbao, were shot in the back. On 8 May of this year, our comrade Francisco Pina Orce, along with eleven other prisoners, was executed in the labour camp Omells de Nagaya, in the province of