Late at night on 21 May 1931 (Zheng Chaolin’s Memoirs says the 21st, Pu Dezhi and Wang Fanxi say the 22nd, Peng Shuzhi and Chen Bilan say the 23rd: the archives confirm the 21st), just twenty days after their unification, the Trotskyists received their first big blow when five of the nine members of the Central Committee were arrested, including all the entire Standing Committee apart from Chen Duxiu. The four members of the Standing Committee arrested were Zheng Chaolin, Wang Fanxi, Chen Yimou, and Song Fengchun. The others arrested were Pu Dezhi (a Central Committee member), He Zishen and his wife Zhang Yisen, Zheng Chaolin’s wife Liu Jingzhen, Lou Guohua, Jiang Changshi, and Wang Zhihuai and his wife and daughter, thirteen in all. Suddenly, the Chinese Trotskyists had been hit by a disaster.

In fact, the destruction could have been avoided.

After 5 May, the Trotskyists’ Standing Committee met once again in Wang Zhihuai’s home, to prepare for a meeting the following day to discuss a draft of the first issue of Spark. They decided to hold a bigger conference on 22 May in the original venue to discuss propaganda. Naturally, Chen Duxiu wanted to be present.

On 21 May, Zheng Chaolin held a meeting in his own home to discuss propaganda work. Zhao Ji, Wu Jiyan, and Yan Lingfeng (who had not yet joined the Trotskyist movement) attended. After the meeting, Zhao Ji left and Yan Lingfeng and Wu Jiyan stayed behind to play mahjong. Half way through the game, the Trotskyist Peng Guiqiu rushed in. He took Zheng Chaolin to one side and said: ‘Yu Mutao has turned traitor. The police will come tonight at ten to make arrests’. He then hurried off. Zheng Chaolin told Yan Lingfeng and Wu Jiyan the news and pointed out that he himself had just moved, and Yu Mutao did not know his new address. Yan Lingfeng went home, and Wu Jiyan stayed with Zheng Chaolin to await further news.

Zheng Chaolin thought that, before anything else, Chen Duxiu should be told, so he would not turn up at Wang Zhihuai’s home the following day. Only Zheng Chaolin knew Chen Duxiu’s address, so he rushed off and told him. After leaving Chen Duxiu’s house, he went to see Peng Guiqiu, to ask him where he got the information. At Peng Guiqiu’s place he bumped into Xie Depan. He questioned him, and discovered that Peng Shuzhi had been the first to receive the news about the planned raid. That Yu Mutao was the traitor was merely Peng Shuzhi’s inference.

Zheng Chaolin became worried. Who was the traitor? No one knew. Perhaps the traitor knew Zheng Chaolin’s address. He immediately took his leave of
Xie Depan and Peng Guiqiu and hurried home. On the way, he informed Liu Renjing and his wife, who lived nearby. There were no taxis, and even if there had been, he could not have afforded one. Because of all the rushing about, it was past ten o'clock before he reached home. Wu Jiyan and his wife were still waiting, but they hurried away when they heard about the change. Zheng Chaolin discussed the situation with his wife Liu Jingzhen, and, although it was late, they decided it would be best to look for a hotel. While they were packing, a team of Chinese and foreign police burst in and took them away to the police-station at Tilanqiao.

Peng Shuzhi’s wife Chen Bilan was working as a teacher in a middle school of which the Trotskyist Lu Chen was principal. That night she was with her two-year-old daughter having dinner at Lu’s home when the Trotskyist Ma Renzhi came running in and told her someone had turned traitor and the police were going to her home to arrest Peng Shuzhi. Who the informer was remained unclear. Ma Renzhi also told Chen Bilan that he had received the information from his friend Pan Guzhi. Pan had a close friend who was working as a senior staff-officer in the Guomindang’s Longhua command-headquarters. This man had told Pan that someone dressed as a worker had turned up that afternoon and defected. He had handed in a list of names, including Peng Shuzhi’s. He had said he did not know Chen Duxiu’s address, but added that Chen often went to the home of a man called Zheng – Zheng Chaolin – and that if they waited there, they would be able to catch Chen. On hearing the news, Ma Renzhi had hurried over to Lu Chen’s home to discuss with Lu how to inform Peng Shuzhi, and there he had found Chen Bilan.

Chen Bilan rushed home, where she found Peng Shuzhi talking with Xie Depan. Peng Shuzhi had decided that Xie Depan should tell Zheng Chaolin, and he himself would sleep at Lu Chen’s house. However, it turned out not to be practical for him and Chen Bilan to sleep in Lu Chen’s guest-room, from where they could hear Lu’s wife in the nearby bedroom complaining all night, so they got up early the next day and moved to a hotel, to escape the ordeal.

If Zhou Enlai, who was also in Shanghai at the time, had been in charge, the Guomindang would probably have captured no one. Unfortunately, things were in the hands of a collection of inexperienced Trotskyist scholars who were good at talking but little else.

In fact, the informer was not Yu Mutao but Ma Yufu.

Ma Yufu was a native of Hubei. He was an early member of the Chinese Communist Party and had sailed to France with Deng Xiaoping to take part in the work-study programme. Later, together with Deng Xiaoping, Zuo Quan, Fu Zhong, and others, he had gone from France to Moscow, where he studied at the University for the Toilers of the East. After returning to China, he was