

A Transnational Friendship in the Age of Extremes: Leon Trotsky and the Pfemferts

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It must have been a bleak day that January of 1933. No more than five people had gathered in a Berlin cemetery. ‘Nobody spoke a word. Everyone placed a few flowers on the coffin and waited until the grave was filled in,’ one of those present recalled.¹ The Russian Communist Zinaida Volkova was being buried. At the age of just thirty one, suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis and severe depression, she committed suicide on 5 January.²

Even Zinaida’s parents were unable to come to the funeral. They were living in exile on a Turkish island near Istanbul. Travel to Germany was impossible because most European states had been denying her father entry for years.³ Although he had been deprived of power in his Russian homeland, governments on the continent still regarded Leon Trotsky as a dangerous agitator. For that reason, the burial arrangements were all taken care of by Alexandra Pfemfert.⁴ She had looked after Zinaida since her arrival in Berlin in the autumn of 1931. She had also worked intensively to secure the young woman’s medical treatment. Now Alexandra and her husband Franz Pfemfert were among the mourners.⁵

Although they had never met personally, the Pfemferts had been friends with Leon Trotsky since the late 1920s.⁶ The two men were united by the fact that they had both been pushed to the margins of the communist movement. Trotsky, a leading figure in the October Revolution and the young Soviet Republic had been on the losing side of the internecine struggle against Stalin within the Communist Party of

the Soviet Union (CPSU) and was now living in exile. Pfemfert had once been an important member of the German communist left. Since then, he had passed through various organisations and fallen out with an array of leaders. His once influential magazine *Die Aktion* was now only published intermittently. Apart from their acute anti-Stalinism, however, they were rather far apart in political terms. The Pfemferts tended toward council communist and syndicalist positions while Trotsky remained oriented toward party communism. They nonetheless became confidants. The Pfemferts looked after Trotsky's personal affairs in Germany and Alexandra translated the Russian dissident's works into German.

The following article will describe the relationship between Trotsky and the Pfemferts.⁷ It is the story of an uncommon, not entirely apolitical relationship in the often-anxious age of extremes. It exemplifies friendships within the communist movement that grew across national borders during the period between the world wars. The Russian revolutionary and the German-Russian intellectual couple were not only part of a transnational network of left-wing opposition communists. In a sense they were one of its nodes: Trotsky, the polyglot dissident, cultivated extensive written correspondence with various actors within international communism. Opposition members from every country came and went from his house on the Turkish island of Büyükada (Prinkipo). The Pfemferts' Berlin apartment, on the other hand, had been a gathering spot for expressionist artists for a long time – until it later became the connecting point between their Russian friend and the opposition in the Soviet Union.⁸

State of the Research

A boom in biographical studies has been underway for some time now and it includes works on members of the communist opposition.⁹ This development also includes texts on the Pfemferts. Long forgotten in both Germanys before 1989, their lives can now be described as well researched. In 2004, Julijana Ranc published an impressive monograph about Alexandra,¹⁰ and while no biography of Franz yet exists, a comprehensive volume with documents about his life has been published.¹¹ A great deal of work has also been done on *Die Aktion*, which Franz

Pfemfert edited for more than two decades. The fact that this magazine is considered one of the most important journals of German expressionism has meant that it has to date been given significantly more attention than its publisher.¹² The first volumes were reprinted in the 1960s and every issue was then republished in 1983. Hamburg-based publisher Lutz Schulenburg even continued publishing *Die Aktion* from 1981 until his death in 2013.

While the literature on Leon Trotsky could fill rows of bookshelves,¹³ the amount of writing on his German political allies is negligible. Initially, in the second half of the 1920s, it was the Leninbund under Hugo Urbahns' leadership. Starting in the 1930s, this shifted to the United Left Opposition of the KPD, known as Bolshevik/Leninists, Germany's first independent Trotskyist tendency. Each had only an individual monograph dedicated to them.¹⁴ The relationship between Trotsky and the Pfemferts has mostly been ignored in these works, which have relegated Franz and Alexandra to footnotes at best.¹⁵ Apart from, for example, Julijana Ranc, none of the authors recognise that the Pfemferts contributed, at a very early stage, to Trotsky's ability to regain a political foothold in Germany after having long been regarded as an 'unperson' in the communist movement.¹⁶ Despite the fact that the Gestapo destroyed the Pfemferts archive, it was possible to draw from unpublished sources for the following account.¹⁷ Particularly noteworthy here is the collection of Trotsky's papers at Harvard University. It includes extensive correspondence between the Russian dissident and the Pfemferts.¹⁸

The Pfemferts

The Pfemferts were undoubtedly among the most colourful personalities in the Weimar Republic's intellectual left-wing communist milieu. Franz Pfemfert, who was born in Lötzen in East Prussian (Gizycko) in 1879, came from a humble background. His father, who died while Franz was still young, was a baker and his mother sold poultry and fish for a living. After his father's death, Pfemfert grew up in part with his mother in Berlin and partly with his grandfather in Lötzen. Despite his simple origins, however, he would later find himself among the Berlin bohemian circuit. His friend Fritz Brupbacher, a doctor and writer from Zurich,

described the circumstances as follows: 'Pfefmert is sort of a child of nature among educated and sophisticated Berliners. He, the non-intellectual, is the best representative of the best that the intellectuals of this era embody'.¹⁹

Pfefmert met Alexandra Ramm, a Russian-born Jew, in Berlin's famous Café des Westens. She was five years his junior and had come to the German capital in 1901.²⁰ They were married in 1911, the year in which the first issue of Pfefmert's magazine *Die Aktion* was published. Alexandra worked on it with him from the outset. She wrote short articles and reviews and provided translations from Russian. Their journal very quickly became the mouthpiece for leading expressionist artists and writers. Ramm's biographer emphasises that, 'In fact the list of *Aktion* employees amounts to an encyclopaedia of the young generation of artists at that time'.²¹ *Die Aktion* provided a forum for authors like Georg Heym, Heinrich Mann, Gottfried Benn, Oskar Kanehl, and Erwin Piscator as well as painters and graphic artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Lyonel Feininger, Oskar Kokoschka, and George Grosz. The magazine's reputation was also supported by 'Aktion evenings', in which its authors gave readings. In addition, Alexandra Ramm-Pfefmert opened the *Aktions Buch- und Kunsthandlung* (Aktion Bookshop and Art Gallery) in Berlin's Wilmersdorf district in 1917. Exhibitions, including by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Egon Schiele, were held there regularly in the first few years. The bookstore therefore became 'more a hub for smoking and chatting and more a gathering point for an intellectual elite than a shop'.²²

That is why Franz in particular is known today as a key figure of the expressionist movement. But the Pfefmerts were aware that *Die Aktion* was far from being exclusively an art journal. The magazine addressed political questions from the beginning, as the subheading indicated: In the early days it read 'Journal of Libertarian Politics and Literature' and was later changed to 'Weekly Journal for Politics, Literature, and Art'. Within its pages, Pfefmert warned of a possible world war as early as 1911. And when Rosa Luxemburg was convicted in February 1914 due to her anti-militarist speeches, he dedicated a special issue to her. Under the heading 'Die Aktion Bookshop Recommends', the Pfefmerts regularly promoted books by anarchist (Bakunin and Kropotkin) and socialist theorists (Marx, Engels, Bebel, Mehring, Lenin, and Luxemburg).

Moreover, *Die Aktion* was the first German-language magazine to publish the constitution of the young Soviet Union.²³

It is remarkable that the journal was allowed to continue publication during World War I. Pfemfert apparently skilfully skated by the government censors. By printing war poems, assembling reports from other periodicals that glorified war, and publishing special editions that were each dedicated to the culture of an 'enemy' country, he managed to hold his line without speaking out about it.²⁴ Moreover, Pfemfert endeavoured to deliver his journal to soldiers at the front free of charge. Erwin Piscator recalled, 'How many nights [during the war I] had *Die Aktion* in my hands – and wanted to bring it over to the English and Canadian trenches. Look, this exists too! Another Germany! Pfemfert embodied the other Germany'.²⁵

After the war, Pfemfert was a participant in the founding conference of the KPD and became a member.²⁶ It is not known whether or not his wife joined the party as well, however she did remain in its political environment.²⁷ *Die Aktion* was initially dedicated explicitly to the communist movement. Pfemfert therefore used it to document the Spartacus League's programme and to report on the founding of the Communist International.²⁸ Given that the KPD party newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* was banned from March to December 1919, it is not unlikely that *Die Aktion*, which at peak periods was doing print runs in the tens of thousands, became an important source of information for at least some party members.²⁹

But Pfemfert did not remain in the KPD for long. While he had declared his affiliation with the opposition early on,³⁰ he ultimately left the Party after the Heidelberg conference (1920) and joined the newly established Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD).³¹ Someone quipped at the time that, 'Franz Pfemfert is to the left of himself'.³² In fact, from then on changing organisations would become a constant in Pfemfert's political activities. He had to leave the KAPD in 1921 because he rejected its affinity with the Comintern. Shortly thereafter he joined with Otto Rühle and Oskar Kanehl to establish the council communist *Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union- Einheitsorganisation* (the General Workers Union – Unity Organisation, or AAU-E), for which *Die Aktion* would become the 'semi-official mouthpiece'.³³ There was soon factional

infighting here too, leading to a split into several groups – all of which bore the name AAU-E. Finally, in 1926, Pfemfert joined the Spartacus League of Left-Wing Communist Organisations, founded by Iwan Katz and often called Spartacus League No. 2.³⁴

Trotsky becomes a ‘non-person’

By then Leon Trotsky had long been a ‘non-person’ in the German Communist Party. That had not always been the case: He had been highly respected within the KPD during the first few years after the Russian Revolution, and regarded as an important leader in the October Revolution. As Hermann Weber writes, ‘His name was always mentioned in the same breath as Lenin’s’. The KPD naturally translated and published Trotsky’s writings. Even in February 1924, his portrait – along with those of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht – adorned the meeting room in which the Middle Rhine district held its regional conference and in late September of the same year, *Die Rote Fahne* announced a ‘Trotsky night’.³⁵

But a campaign against ‘Trotskyism’ had already begun in the Soviet Union. In the conflicts that followed Lenin’s death, Bukharin accused Trotsky of deviating from ‘Leninism’. Stalin recalled Trotsky’s Menshevik past and charged him with failing to overcome his ‘old opportunistic ways’.³⁶ At the same time, Stalinisation was taking hold in the communist parties abroad, which is to say that they were increasingly becoming undemocratic and subordinate to the Soviet Party.³⁷ It was in this context that the anti-Trotsky campaign entered the KPD; and it worked: Robert J. Alexander has estimated that the German party was bereft of anybody who would invoke Trotsky by 1925.³⁸ The founder of the Red Army was even in a difficult position among the ranks of the opposition. Broué stated that the only Trotskyists in Germany were members of the Soviet opposition in exile.³⁹ Karl Retzlaw recalled that he had formed ‘a small group’ in 1925, writing that, ‘We were only six to ten comrades who met several times a week to discuss German and Russian Party affairs [...] In our discussions, we continued to affirm Trotsky’s theory of “permanent revolution”. That is actually how the first “Trotsky group” in Germany came to be. But there was no talk of any “Trotskyism”. We had no

connection with Trotsky; we did not attempt to make contact nor did Trotsky. We didn't even know that Trotsky was in Berlin for several weeks in the summer of 1925'.⁴⁰

But apart from small groups such as this one, the Soviet dissident was in fact taboo in the German Party, including among his future allies. The KPD left considered him 'right wing'⁴¹ and was therefore particularly strident in the 'fight against Trotskyism'. Broué believed that, 'These very "left-wing radicals" staged a witch-hunt within the party against the slightest sign of "Trotskyism"'.⁴² In early February 1925, leading left-wing communist Ruth Fischer gave a lecture at a conference of party workers in Essen with the theme 'Against Trotskyism in All Forms'.⁴³ A measure was introduced in Berlin's Wedding district calling for Trotsky to be expelled from the Comintern.⁴⁴ In August 1926, opposition member Hans Weber declared in the name of his group that, 'We will never go along with Trotskyism'.⁴⁵ And even Georg Jungclas, who would later be among the leading German Trotskyists in the Federal Republic, recalled still having serious misgivings about the Soviet dissident in 1926.⁴⁶ At that time there was only one well-known German communist who stuck by Trotsky: Franz Pfemfert.

***Die Aktion* Publishes Trotsky**

With the onset of Stalinisation in the KPD, *Die Aktion* became an important platform for opponents of that process. Pfemfert himself had been publishing polemics against the loss of democracy within the party since it had been under the leadership of the left wing around Ruth Fischer, Arkadi Maslow, and Werner Scholem. For example, he distributed the satirical newspaper *Bolshevisation: Journal for Theory and Practice of Maslowism*, Edited by the 'Head Office for Bolshevisation' enclosed in his magazine.⁴⁷ Various members of the Communist opposition were given the opportunity to voice their opinions in *Die Aktion*. For example, in September 1926 it published the complete 'Statement on the Russian Question', a text signed by almost 700 Party officials calling on the KPD leadership to allow discussion of developments in the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ Pfemfert also published writings by groups like the Wedding Opposition and the Katz Group in his magazine.⁴⁹

But in particular he published articles by Trotsky early on and in doing so stood against the anti-Trotsky campaign. For example, the text *1917: The Lessons of October*, translated by Alexandra Ramm, was published in *Die Aktion* in February 1925.⁵⁰ In an introductory comment, Pfemfert noted that, “Lenin and Trotsky, Trotsky and Lenin” – this combination of names has been standard and obligatory for years in every section of the KPD press. For years it has been considered a historic truth that “Lenin was the head and Trotsky the sword” of the October Revolution. And whoever wanted to be a good party member had photographs of both leaders hanging over his bed. That is all over now! Instead, as Pfemfert all but prophetically noted, the Soviet Party leadership had now “determined” in hundreds of speeches and articles that Trotsky is a “counterrevolutionary”, “party wrecker”, and “Menshevik” and that “100 Chamberlains would be less dangerous than three Trotskys”, as the wordsmith Zinoviev recently scolded in *Pravda*. So today the party slogan is “Away with Trotsky!”. Tomorrow it may just as well be “Away with Zinoviev”.

He justified printing the article by arguing that, ‘Because Trotsky’s work is also important for us, I will provide in the columns that follow the *unabridged* German text of the pamphlet that is the *external* cause of the grotesque bluster coming from the ruling clique in Moscow’.⁵¹ This would subsequently remain an important motivation for publishing Trotsky’s writings. For example, in 1928 Pfemfert published the last speech Trotsky gave before he was expelled from the Soviet Union, describing it as one of the ‘most important indictments of Moscow’s absolutist leadership’.⁵²

Start of the Friendship

Yet the Pfemferts and Trotsky did not make personal contact until 1929. Alexandra, who worked as a translator, had learned from the publishing company S. Fischer Verlag that Trotsky wanted to write an autobiography. She looked up his address in the newspaper *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* and wrote, ‘Esteemed Lev Davidovich! Perhaps this letter will reach you [...] I have wanted to translate your books into German for a long time. I have been living in Berlin for quite a while and am married to Franz Pfemfert (he publishes *Die Aktion*, in case that means anything

to you). I have translated a lot – almost an entire volume of Lenin. C.L. Hirschfeld recently published my translation of Pokrovsky's Russian Stories. I have at times translated your works as well. If I may say so, your books have been poorly translated (at times scandalously so).⁵³

The letter along with the samples she would send later apparently convinced Trotsky. Alexandra Ramm, who worked and published under her maiden name, was in fact selected to translate the book, which led to a close collaboration that would last for years.⁵⁴ She subsequently translated other writings by Trotsky into German, including *The History of the Russian Revolution* and *The Permanent Revolution*. Franz Pfemfert was instrumental in the search for a publisher and even published some of these texts through his own publishing company.⁵⁵ It was through his contacts with foreign publishers that *My Life* became available in numerous European countries.⁵⁶

Franz proofread the translated manuscripts, but Alexandra did not give him a great deal of leeway to suggest improvements. In a letter to Trotsky, he jokingly complained that she 'watched over every word like a mother hen'.⁵⁷ Trotsky also frequently had to argue with Ramm about contentious phrasing. Ranc describes their collaboration as a case of, 'an extremely accurate and assertive translator meeting an extremely accurate and assertive author. They both valued highly precise yet stylistically optimal translation and, where details were concerned, they each would only indulge the other to the extent justifiable from their own perspective'.⁵⁸ Trotsky thoroughly appreciated that intensive work and explicitly thanked her for it in the foreword to his 1930 autobiography. 'In making this book available to the German reader,' he wrote, 'I would like to note that Alexandra Ramm was not only the translator of the Russian original but has also continuously ensured the fate of the book. Here I would like to offer my sincere thanks'.⁵⁹

Ramm was in fact much more than just a translator. While Trotsky was living on the island of Büyükada, she supplied him with German and Russian daily newspapers, political journals, pamphlets, and important books.⁶⁰ Describing their relationship, Ranc writes, 'Considering that he was unanimously regarded by his contemporaries as rather aloof and had only very few friends during his lifetime, it is an sign of considerable trust that he even asked for advice and help with private matters' (p98).

For several years, the Pfemferts functioned as an important liaison between Trotsky and his remaining comrades in the Soviet Union and their apartment became a hub in the transnational communist opposition network. Numerous letters and postcards made their way from Siberian camps to Büyükada via the Pfemferts.⁶¹ They provided a contact point for Trotsky's political friends. As a result, they found themselves at various times hosting guests including Max Eastman and Max Schachtman from the United States as well as the French Trotskyists Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Naville. Additionally, Alexandra Ramm managed some of the royalties that Trotsky received from Fischer Verlag, his publisher. She used the money to pay for books and, at his request, handed over specific sums to political friends like Kurt Landau and the penniless dissident Gavril Myasnikov.⁶²

'We could perhaps say that Leon Trotsky absolutely depends on our advice where non-political matters are concerned,' Franz Pfemfert would later write.⁶³ For example, they were both able to save Trotsky from taking on the Latvian Valentin Olberg as his private secretary. At a meeting in Berlin, Olberg made such a suspicious impression on them that they immediately warned Trotsky about the young man. Trotsky heeded the warning and it later emerged that Olberg was in all likelihood employed by the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU).⁶⁴ Additionally, the Pfemferts not only befriended Trotsky's daughter Zinaida but also looked after his son Lev Sedov, who studied in Berlin between 1931 and 1933.⁶⁵ 'My wife and I have been in contact with Trotsky since 1929 and it was only a matter of course that he and his wife would ask us to look after their son and daughter in Berlin,' Franz Pfemfert recalled. 'We worked to obtain a visa to enter Germany for his son Lev Sedov (through the attorney Dr Oskar Cohn) when he had an eye disease and my wife enabled him to be examined by a well-known eye specialist'.⁶⁶

Writing about an encounter with Sedov, the writer Thea Sternheim, wife of Pfemfert's friend Carl Sternheim, noted in her diary, 'Evening with Pfemferts at the *Threepenny Opera* film showing in the atrium. Leon Trotsky's 26 year-old son Sedov was with us – an extremely nice looking young man with light brown hair and blue eyes but who chain smokes and vividly explains that he goes through fifty of them every day.' His poor knowledge of German was apparently useful to Sternheim, who

wrote that, 'Because he hardly speaks any German but has fluent French, Franz Pfemfert was shut out of the discussion from the outset and we lapsed straight away into a friendly, almost interesting conversation. He is quite likeable'.⁶⁷

It is not difficult to comprehend from this that Sternheim did not greet Franz's presence with enthusiasm. In fact his contemporaries regarded him as difficult. The writer Henry Jacoby would later describe him as, 'A scrawny little man with ...a thin voice that verges on shrill, leading people to think he has tuberculosis'. Pfemfert was a chain smoker and often ill. 'People sometimes used to think he was declining until he travelled to Switzerland to recover at the expense of the anarcho-Marxist doctor Fritz Brupbacher. Nobody would have thought he would make it to seventy-five'.⁶⁸

Leninbund chairman Hugo Urbahns once wrote to Trotsky that Pfemfert was, 'a complete outsider [...] In my opinion, one must be very careful with Pfemfert'.⁶⁹ In the words of writer Richard Huelsenbeck, Pfemfert had, 'some of the dogmatism of a Robespierre'. Thea Sternheim even thought that, 'As with anyone who is wedded to a theory, Pfemfert's intellectual development is at a standstill'.⁷⁰ Günter Dallmann also recalled that, 'Pfemfert was a fanatic, during his active life a monomaniac for literary and political feuding, never inclined to compromise, and persistently adhered to a rigid friend-foe approach'.⁷¹ Pfemfert's frequent organisational shifts also fit this pattern.

Pfemfert's political rigor occasionally carried over into his personal relationships as well. He had a falling out with Otto Rühle in 1925, for example, because Rühle had a different view of psychoanalysis. While Pfemfert rejected it as 'bourgeois science', Rühle found it to be a forward-looking theory. The result was lifelong hostility between the two former comrades.⁷²

Birgit Schmidt recognised that, 'Pfemfert was a difficult person. The kind who, during his lifetime, started fights with everyone, fell out with (almost) everyone, and then would never speak a word to them again. He was simultaneously the smallest communist, council communist, and anarchist party that has ever existed as well as the most intransigent'.⁷³ Even Trotsky, who otherwise was never one to avoid ideological confrontation, once asked Pfemfert to leave political issues out of their

correspondence.⁷⁴ This may have been the basis for their enduring friendship.

Relationship with Trotskyism

In light of this request, the suspicion that Pfemfert or his wife were Trotskyists, as is occasionally expressed in the literature, is baseless.⁷⁵ They were both in close contact with several of the active Trotskyists in Germany (above all Lev Sedov and Erwin Ackerknecht),⁷⁶ however, by and large, they kept clear of the Leninbund as well as the independent Trotskyist tendencies that emerged later. This is proven by a letter from Pfemfert to Trotsky, in which he wrote, 'I would like it very much because it would keep me out of any conflict if the comrades in the "opposition" wanted to regard Franz Pfemfert as nothing other than the publisher of your L[eon] T[rotsky] pamphlets, somewhat akin to Malik Verlag, Fischer, etc'.⁷⁷ Alexandra Ramm also kept her distance from the Leninbund. In the summer of 1929, for example, she critically questioned Trotsky on his articles in the local newspapers, writing: 'Is it worth it for you to publish in the *Volkswille*? They are a public that isn't really public at all'.⁷⁸

Moreover, Trotsky's refusal to discuss political matters with Pfemfert is not exactly indicative of membership in the Trotskyist movement. Rather, Trotsky was just one of many dissident communists to whom Pfemfert opened his journal. *Die Aktion* also offered a forum for anarchists, social revolutionaries, and anarcho-syndicalists. This was in keeping with Franz Pfemfert's basic outlook. In Gleb J. Albert's words, he embodied, 'the archetype of a radical intellectual who spent his entire life clinging to the basic principles of freedom and had no regard for ideological dogmas, short-term political realities, or party structures'.⁷⁹ Something similar could be said of his wife, whose respect for and loyalty to Trotsky should in no way be confused with unconditional political support. That was, as Ranc writes, 'diametrically opposed, in any case, to her "anti-authoritarian" nature'.⁸⁰

This assessment is also confirmed by Alexandra's sister Maria, who wrote, 'It's not true that Franz Pfemfert presented a Trotskyist outlook in *Die Aktion*. Even later on he was never a Trotskyist. His and Alexandra

Pfemfert's [...] friendship with Trotsky was based primarily on her participation in and sympathy for the great revolutionary and important writer, one of Stalin's victims'.⁸¹ The Pfemferts saw the benefit of their work somewhere else entirely. They ensured that it was possible to read Trotsky in Germany. They made his writing available to a German-speaking public at a time when the Communist Party had long since rendered him *persona non grata*.⁸²

A Brief Overview of 1933-1941

The history of *Die Aktion* came to a close with the National Socialists' accession to power in January 1933. Even during the last few years before that, Pfemfert had only been able to publish the magazine irregularly due to financial and health problems. After the Reichstag Fire Franz and Alexandra finally had to make a hasty retreat from the country. Their house had already been searched several times by that point and, moreover, they had been given evidence that the SA had assigned a hit squad to kill them. They left behind their extensive scholarly and literary library as well as the Aktionverlag's archives and correspondence, all of which were seized by the Nazis.⁸³ Their friend Camill Hoffmann, who was a press attaché at the Czechoslovakian embassy, noted that, 'The Pfemferts were on their way out and wanted to leave a trunk full of letters from Lenin, Lenin's Testament, and all of Trotsky's things for safe keeping before they left. I couldn't take them because of all the responsibility. Now that trunk is with ordinary, unsuspecting people'.⁸⁴

Like their friend Leon Trotsky, the Pfemferts now had to live in exile. Their first destination was the Czech city of Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary) and from there they moved to Paris in 1936. It was at that point or earlier that they resumed their correspondence with Trotsky, which had lapsed shortly after they fled Germany. Alexandra Ramm also translated Trotsky's work on Stalin's crimes.⁸⁵ Apart from that, the two lived in constant poverty and were scarcely politically active. However, they did at least reconnect with some friends and acquaintances from their time in Berlin, such as Thea Sternheim and Lev Sedov.

In Paris, however, they once again had to endure the death of one of Trotsky's children. Lev Sedov, who had been followed by the Soviet secret

service since his arrival in Paris in 1933, passed away unexpectedly on 16 February 1938 following a successful appendectomy. The exact circumstances have never been clarified. 'Dear Comrades Mr and Mrs Trotsky', Franz Pfemfert wrote on 20 February, 'we now stand deeply shaken for the second time at the grave of one of your children. It is uncanny how a mindless fate ceaselessly rages against you'.⁸⁶

Once again, the parents were unable to attend the burial, because by that time they were living in Mexico. The Pfemferts would also ultimately settle there in the spring of 1941. Twelve years after first making contact, there was the possibility of finally being able to meet Trotsky in person. But Franz and Alexandra came too late and were only able to meet Natalia Sedova: A Soviet agent had killed her husband a few months earlier.

Notes

- 1 Karl Retzlaw, *Spartakus. Aufstieg und Niedergang. Erinnerungen eines Parteiarbeiters*, 2nd rev.ed., Frankfurt/M, 1972, p353.
- 2 For more details, see Pierre Broué, *Trotsky. Eine politische Biographie*, Vol. 2, Cologne, 2003, pp838-848. See also, 'Der Polizeipräsident in Berlin, Polizeiamt Lichtenberg-Friedrichshain an Leon Sedoff, 18/03/1933', in Trotsky-Archive, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge (henceforth: TA Harvard), bMS Russ 13.4, D 90: 'Your sister Zinaida Volkoff, née Bronstein, was found dead on 5 January 1933 at approximately 2:00 PM in the home of the Widow Beck, Berlin-Karlshorst, Treskowallee 74'.
- 3 For more on his attempt to obtain a German visa see, for example, Trotsky's correspondence with the attorney Kurt Rosenfeld, in TA Harvard, bMS Russ 13.1, 4307-4313. See also the telegram from 'Leon Trotsky to Paul Löbe in 1929', in TA Harvard, bMS Russ 13.1, 8929: 'Herr Reichstag President Loebe, Berlin. Sadly no opportunity found has shown me practical benefits of democratic right of asylum Trotsky'. Only in November 1932 was Trotsky permitted to enter Denmark, where he gave a speech in Copenhagen on the fifteenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The text of the speech has been published in *Permanente Revolution*, Vol. 2, No. 34, 5th week of December 1932. For a reprint, see

- Leon D. Trotzki, *Die russische Revolution. Kopenhagener Rede 1932*, Vienna, 1975.
- 4 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 10/02/1937', in TA Harvard, *bMS Russ 13.4, D 93*; Julijana Ranc, *Alexandra Ramm-Pfemfert. Ein Gegenleben*, Hamburg, 2004, pp100f.
 - 5 Retzlau, *Spartakus*, p353. The three others were Anton Grylewicz, Karl Retzlau, and Trotsky's son Lev Sedov, who also lived in Berlin at that time.
 - 6 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p78.
 - 7 This account is based on Marcel Bois, *Kommunisten gegen Hitler und Stalin. Die linke Opposition der KPD in der Weimarer Republik. Eine Gesamtdarstellung*, Essen, 2014, particularly pp284-292.
 - 8 For more on the transnational networks in the communist movement, see Bernhard H. Bayerlein, 'Das neue Babylon – Strukturen und Netzwerke der Kommunistischen Internationale und ihre Klassifizierung', in *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung 2004*, pp181-270; for this topic in left-wing communism, see Bois, *Kommunisten*, pp515-523.
 - 9 Examples include: Jens Becker, *Heinrich Brandler. Eine politische Biografie*, Hamburg, 2001; Mario Kessler, *Ruth Fischer. Ein Leben mit und gegen Kommunisten (1895-1961)*, Cologne, 2013; Ralf Hoffrogge, *Werner Scholem. Eine politische Biografie (1895-1940)*, Constance, 2014.
 - 10 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*.
 - 11 Lisbeth Exner and Herbert Kapfer (eds.), *Pfemfert. Erinnerungen und Abrechnungen. Texte und Briefe*, Munich 1998, which includes the essays: Lisbeth Exner, 'Vergessene Mythen. Franz Pfemfert und "Die Aktion"' (pp13-60) and Herbert Kapfer, 'Verfolgung und Paranoia. Franz Pfemfert nach der "Aktion"' (pp63-123).
 - 12 Herwig Denker, 'Der pazifistische Protest der "Aktion"', PhD, Freiburg 1962; Paul Raabe, *"Ich schneide die Zeit aus." Expressionismus und Politik in Franz Pfemferts "Aktion" 1911-1918*, Munich, 1964; Lothar Peter, *Literarische Intelligenz und Klassenkampf. "Die Aktion" 1911-1932*, Cologne, 1972; Herbert Günter Dallmann, 'Die Aktion/Franz Pfemfert', in: *Europäische Ideen*, Vol. 48, 1980, pp61-75; Franz Pfemfert: *"Ich setze diese Zeitschrift wider diese Zeit". Sozialpolitische und literaturkritische Aufsätze*, Wolfgang Haug (ed.), Darmstadt, 1985; John D. Halliday, *Karl Kraus, Franz Pfemfert and the First World War: A comparative study of "Die*

- Fackel*” and “*Die Aktion*” between 1911 and 1928, Passau, 1986; Ursula Walburga Baumeister, *Die Aktion 1911-1932. Publizistische Opposition und literarischer Aktivismus der Zeitschrift im restriktiven Kontext*, Jena, 1996; Riccardo Bavaj, *Von links gegen Weimar. Linkes antiparlamentarisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik*, Bonn, 2005, pp378-397; Gleb J. Albert: ‘Ein Mann, ein Blatt: Franz Pfemfert und “Die Aktion” 1911-1932’, in *versa. Zeitschrift für Politik und Kunst*, 7, 2007, pp48-62 [versa ist der Titel der Zeitschrift]
- 13 Accordingly, only two standard works are referenced here, namely the previously cited biography by Pierre Broué and Isaac Deutscher’s three-volume work on Trotsky’s life.
- 14 Rüdiger Zimmermann, *Der Leninbund. Linke Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik*, Düsseldorf, 1978; Wolfgang Alles, *Zur Politik und Geschichte der deutschen Troztkisten ab 1930*, Diplomarbeit [diploma thesis], Frankfurt, 1978 (hereinafter the second published edition will be cited, Cologne 1994); Annegret Schüle, *Trotzkismus in Deutschland bis 1933. “Für die Arbeitereinheitensfront zur Abwehr des Faschismus.”*, Cologne, 1989.
- 15 For example in Zimmermann, *Leninbund*, p220, footnote 27. Similarly in Alles, *Trotzkisten*, p7, footnote 3f. Schüle’s *Trotzkismus in Deutschland* even omitted assessing Pfemfert’s magazine *Die Aktion*, despite the fact that it had regularly published Trotsky’s work. Only Peter Berens has recently pointed out that Franz Pfemfert ‘was an early [...] Trotsky sympathiser’ and had published his writings as early as 1925, see idem, *Trotzkisten gegen Hitler*, Cologne, 2007, p17.
- 16 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, pp71-101.
- 17 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p8.
- 18 ‘Letters from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 30/09/1929 to 22/01/1933’, in TA Harvard, bMS Russ 13.1, 4010-4132; and for individual letters written after 1933, see bMS Russ 13.4, D 15, D 17 u. D 93; ‘Letters from Leon Trotsky to Franz Pfemfert, 16/04/1930 to 19/10/1931’, in bMS Russ 13.1., 9700-9719; ‘Letters from Alexandra Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 14/03/1929 to 05/06/1933’, in bMS Russ 13.1, 3811-3985; ‘Letters from Leon Trotsky to Alexandra Pfemfert, 22/04/1929 to 23/12/1933’, in bMS Russ 13.1., 9508-9678. Trotsky and Alexandra Pfemfert corresponded with one another almost exclusively in Russian. German translations of

- significant portions of this exchange can be found in the appendix to Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, pp249-406.
- 19 Fritz Brupbacher, *60 Jahre Ketzler. Selbstbiographie*, Zurich, 1935, p240.
- 20 For more on the precise moment of her arrival in Berlin, see Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p31.
- 21 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p40. Dallmann: *Die Aktion*, p62 writes that there was, 'Hardly anyone who would later be worth writing about who did not cut his teeth at Pfemfert's *Aktion*'.
- 22 Dallmann, *Die Aktion*, p63.
- 23 Baumeister, *Die Aktion*, p267.
- 24 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p44f.; Albert, 'Ein Mann', pp55f.
- 25 Cited in Albert, 'Ein Mann', p56, who identifies his source as Lutz Schulenburg, 'Franz Pfemfert. Zur Erinnerung an einen radikalen Intellektuellen', in *Die Aktion*, 209, 2004, pp45f.
- 26 See *Die Aktion*, 9, 35/36, 6.9.1919, column 612. *Die Aktion* published very positive reports on the communist movement throughout 1919.
- 27 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p48.
- 28 *Die Aktion*, 9, 2-5, 1.2.1919, columns 51-56 and *ibid*, 18, 1.5.1919, columns 268-273.
- 29 Baumeister, *Die Aktion*, p272 refers to a circulation of 30,000 to 40,000 copies. Dallmann, *Die Aktion*, p63 offers a much lower estimate, writing that, 'Even on its best days, the magazine's circulation must have been below 10,000 and it was significantly lower than that in the post-war period'.
- 30 *Die Aktion*, 9, 49/50, 13.12.1919, column 801.
- 31 For more on its history, see Hans Manfred Bock: *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918-1923. Zur Geschichte und Soziologie der Freien Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands (Syndikalistin), der Allgemeinen Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands und der Kommunistischen Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands*, Meisenheim am Glan, 1969.
- 32 Dallmann, *Die Aktion*, p72.
- 33 Baumeister, *Die Aktion*, p273.
- 34 On this point, see Bois, *Kommunisten*, pp236-241.
- 35 Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus. Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Vol. 1, Frankfurt, 1969, pp93f.

- 36 Broué, *Trotzki*, Vol. 1, p417; Robert V. Daniels, *Das Gewissen der Revolution. Kommunistische Opposition in der Sowjetunion*, Berlin, 1978, p272; Manfred Behrend, 'Leon Trotzki – Verdienste und Fehler eines großen Revolutionärs', in *Hintergrund. Marxistische Zeitschrift für Gesellschaftstheorie und Politik*, 11, 4, 1998, p26. Trotsky, on the other hand, rejected the term Trotskyism, see Siegfried Bahne, 'Der "Trotzkismus" in Geschichte und Gegenwart', in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 15, 1967, p63.
- 37 For Weber's 'Stalinisation thesis' see idem, *Wandlung*; see also idem, 'The Stalinisation of the KPD: Old and New Views', in N. LaPorte, K. Morgan and M. Worley (eds), *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern. Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917-1953*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008, pp22-44.
- 38 Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement*, London, 1991, p407.
- 39 Pierre Broué, 'La thèse de Maurice Stobnicer sur les trotskystes allemands', in *Les Cahiers du C.E.R.M.T.R.I.*, 29, 1983, p2.
- 40 Retzlaw, *Spartakus*, p306.
- 41 Zimmermann, *Leninbund*, p27.
- 42 Pierre Broué, 'Die deutsche Linke und die russische Opposition 1926-1928', in Schüle (ed.), *Trotzkismus in Deutschland*, p9.
- 43 Beatrix Herlemann, *Kommunalpolitik der KPD im Ruhrgebiet 1924-1933*, Wuppertal, 1977, p61. In her lecture, Fischer criticised Trotsky's 'attempt to undermine the Comintern'.
- 44 Broué, *Deutsche Linke*, p9.
- 45 'Minutes of the district leadership meeting on 9 August 1926', in Foundation Archives of the Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives (SAPMO-BArch), RY 1, I 3/1-2/32, Bl. 71.
- 46 Georg Jungclas, *Von der proletarischen Freidenkerjugend im Ersten Weltkrieg zur Linken der siebziger Jahre. Eine politische Dokumentation. 1902-1975*, Hamburg, 1980, p48. It was only after he was expelled from the party in 1928 that he aligned himself with Trotsky.
- 47 *Die Aktion*, 15, 15/16, 28 August 1925, columns 409ff.
- 48 *Die Aktion*, 16, 9, September 1926, columns 218-224. For a detailed overview of the Letter of the 700, see Bois, *Kommunisten*, pp212-227.
- 49 See, for example the following articles in *Die Aktion* by and about oppo-

- sition groups from 1926: 'Zur Lage unserer Partei' (ibid, 16, 1-3, late March 1926, columns 16-19); 'Stalin und Hindenburg gegen die KPD' (ibid, 16, Issue 4, early May 1926, columns 51-54); 'Ein Zwischenspiel' (ibid, 16, 5, early June 1926, columns 101-106); 'Kleiner Briefkasten: Beitrag von Karl Korsch' (ibid, 16, 8, August 1926, columns 197-200); 'Die Weddinger Opposition zum Brief der 700' (ibid, 16, 9, September 1926, columns 224f.); 'Unter falscher Flagge' (ibid, 16, 9, September 1926, columns 226f.).
- 50 See 'Letter from Alexandra Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 24.3.1929', in: Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p251. She writes here that she is the translator of the text.
- 51 Leon Trotzki, '1917. Die Lehren des Oktober', in *Die Aktion*, 15, 2/3, 15.2.1925, column 45.
- 52 'Letzte Rede des Genossen Trotzki', in *Die Aktion*, 18, 1, February 1928, column 7.
- 53 'Letter from Alexandra Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 14/03/1929', in Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, pp249f. Broué, *Trotzki*, Vol. 2, p750 incorrectly claims that their friendship began before the war.
- 54 See also Keßler, *Fischer*, p354, footnote 143, which indicates that Ramm did not use a hyphenated name after she was married.
- 55 Leo Trotzki, *Wer leitet heute die Kommunistische Internationale*, edited by Franz Pfemfert, Berlin 1930; Leon Trotzki, *Die permanente Revolution*, Berlin, 1930.
- 56 Kapfer, *Verfolgung*, p68.
- 57 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotzki, 12/08/1932', in Exner/Kapfer, *Pfemfert*, p316.
- 58 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p75.
- 59 Leo Trotzki, *Mein Leben. Versuch einer Autobiographie*, Berlin, 1961, p11.
- 60 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p72.
- 61 Kapfer, *Verfolgung*, p69.
- 62 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, pp78f.
- 63 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 10.2.1937', in TA Harvard, BMS Russ 13.4, D 93.
- 64 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky, 1.4.1930', in TA Harvard, BMS Russ 13.4, D 15; see also Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p94. On Olberg's shadowy activity: Hans Schafranek, *Das kurze Leben des Kurt Landau*.

- Ein österreichischer Kommunist als Opfer der stalinistischen Geheimpolizei*, Vienna, 1988, pp383-400.
- 65 'Belegbuch für Studenten von Leon Sedoff, Technische Hochschule Berlin', in TA Harvard, BMS Russ 13.4, D 397. It states that Sedov was enrolled for Electrical Engineering from the winter semester 1931-32 until the winter semester 1932-33 at what is now the Technical University in Berlin and attended lectures and tutorials. An interesting detail is that, under 'Nationality' he is listed as 'stateless'.
- 66 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotzki', 1.2.1937', in TA Harvard, BMS Russ 13.4, D 93.
- 67 Entry dated 25 February 1931, in *Thea Sternheim: Tagebücher 1903-1971*, edited by Thomas Ehrsam and Regula Wyss, Vol. 2: 1925-1936, Göttingen, 2002, p330.
- 68 Henry Jacoby, *Von des Kaisers Schule zu Hitlers Zuchthaus. Erlebnisse und Begegnungen. Geschichte einer Jugend links-außen in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt/M, 1980, p79.
- 69 'Letter from Hugo Urbahns to Leon Trotsky, 25.3.1929', in TA Harvard, BMS Russ 13.1, 5616.
- 70 Both quotes come from the collections in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, see *Thea Sternheim: Tagebuch*, entry dated 4.3.1926 and Richard Huelsenbeck, *Mns. der Memoiren (1955)*, p55 cited in Baumeister, *Die Aktion*, p273.
- 71 Dallmann, *Die Aktion*, p64.
- 72 Albert, *Ein Mann*, p59.
- 73 Birgit Schmidt, 'Die Einmannpartei. Dem Rätekommunisten Franz Pfemfert zum 50. Todestag', in *Jungle World*, 23, 26.5.2004.
- 74 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotzki, 14.8.1929', in Exner/Kapfner: *Pfemfert*, pp299-302.
- 75 See Kapfer, *Verfolgung*, p69. Also Albert, *Ein Mann*, p59 believes that Pfemfert was not a Trotskyist.
- 76 'Interview with Dr. Erwin H. Ackerknecht in Zürich, aufgenommen durch Dr. Werner Röder im Rahmen der Dokumentation zur Emigration 1933-1945, 29.3.1971', in Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich, ZS 2077, Vol. 1.
- 77 'Letter from Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotzki, 8.3.1930', in TA Harvard, BMS Russ 13.1, 4045.

- 78 'Letter from Alexandra Ramm-Pfemfert to Trotzki, [late June/early July 1929]', in Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p269.
- 79 Albert, *Ein Mann*, p61.
- 80 Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p77.
- 81 'Letter from Maria Schaefer to Paul Raabe, 10.11.1963', cited in Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p91.
- 82 His autobiography *Mein Leben (My Life)* alone was published with a run of 15,000 copies, six months later another 5,000 were printed, see Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, p506, fn 5. His book *Die permanente Revolution (The Permanent Revolution)*, which Aktionsverlag also published, had a run of 5,000 copies, see Bois, *Kommunisten*, p476.
- 83 Kapfer, *Verfolgung*, pp71ff; Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, pp107ff.
- 84 Camill Hoffmann, *Politisches Tagebuch 1932-1939*, edited and with commentary by Dieter Sudhoff, Klagenfurt, 1995, p83, cited in Kapfer, *Verfolgung*, p70.
- 85 Leon Trotzki, *Stalins Verbrechen*, Zurich 1937. Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, [Buchtitel] pp121 and 553.
- 86 'Letter from Alexandra Pfemfert and Franz Pfemfert to Leon Trotsky and Natalia I. Sedova, 20.2.1938', in Ranc, *Ramm-Pfemfert*, pp405ff.

This article was translated from the German by Joe Keady.