

THE DEATH OF BOB SMILLIE

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There is one interesting piece of testimony relating to the death of Bob Smillie that Tom Buchanan does not discuss in his article on this sad affair ('The death of Bob Smillie, the Spanish Civil War, and the eclipse of the Independent Labour party' *Historical Journal*, 40 (June 1997)). The Orwell Archive at University College, London, contains a statement dated 30 January 1930 that Georges Kopp sent to Fenner Brockway and John McNair of the ILP with a copy to his friend and comrade, George Orwell.¹ In this document, Kopp makes clear his belief that Bob Smillie was kicked to death by his Communist interrogators in an effort to get him to sign statements prejudicial to the POUM and the ILP. As Buchanan points out, Kopp was Smillie's unit commander and was himself arrested during the repression of the POUM and only released in December 1938. His account of events deserves consideration.

According to Kopp's statement he was arrested and taken to the headquarters of the Special Police at 24 Puerta del Angel in Barcelona. Conditions here were a combination of laxity and brutality, with prisoners being executed in the cellars at the same time as it was possible to smuggle messages to the outside. Kopp's interrogators attempted to persuade him to sign statements compromising the POUM, the ILP and various individuals. When he refused, they threatened him with execution, a threat that he took very seriously. What saved his life was that he managed to smuggle out a letter indicating that he was still alive and being held captive. The letter was published in the *New Leader* on 6 August 1937 and the ILP took up his case. What Kopp reveals in his statement is that this letter was not all he succeeded in smuggling out of his prison.

While held in the Special Police headquarters, he managed to break into a filing cabinet and stole two files relating to the cases of Marc Rein² and Bob Smillie. The burglary was not too difficult as the guards were regularly asleep in the early hours of the morning. He had the files smuggled out of the building and handed over to Georges Tioli, an Italian journalist, sympathetic to the POUM, who was to get them to Fenner Brockway.

After his release, he discovered that Tioli, together with the files, had disappeared. He had last been seen in the company of Erwin Wolf, a German Trotskyist, who had also disappeared and, it was believed, had been secretly killed by the Russian GPU. Kopp thought it 'highly probable' that Tioli had also been killed. The files have never been recovered.

Smillie's file, according to Kopp, contained some 200 typewritten pages concerning his interrogation by the GPU. Although he only had time to look briefly through them he could remember that Smillie had been told that a fascist plot had been uncovered in England and that the ILP were implicated in it, that the British police had exposed Fenner Brockway and John McNair as Gestapo agents, and that the POUM was, of course, a fascist organization. His interrogators assured Smillie that they knew he was

¹ University College, London: Orwell Archive, MS A.142. Reproduced below with permission of the Director of Library Services, University College London.

² Marc Rein, another POUM sympathizer, was the son of the Menshevik, Raphael Abramovitch. He was arrested in Barcelona in April 1937 and never seen again.

a 'good antifascist', but that he had got mixed up with the wrong people. Now he could put that right by making a statement. Smillie refused and was told that he would have to 'be taught to behave better'.

The last document in the file was a doctor's report to the effect that Smillie's belly had been perforated by a powerful kick and that his 'intestines were partly hanging outside' and that another kick or blow had 'severed the left side connection between the jaw and the skull and the former was merely hanging on the right side'. The attempt to persuade him to behave better seems to have been somewhat over zealous. Smillie died half an hour after reaching hospital.

As further evidence of Smillie's fate, Kopp reveals that while he was held at the Segorbe concentration camp in January 1938 he had met a German anarcho-syndicalist, Gustav Doster, who had been in hospital when the dying Smillie was brought in. Doster confirmed the nature of Smillie's injuries ('his story was more or less identical'). As far as Kopp was aware, Doster had since gone to Sweden and could probably be approached through the Swedish anarcho-syndicalist organization for a statement. As for the doctor involved, Kopp confesses that he could neither remember his name nor the name of the hospital, but, most interestingly, goes on to say that 'I suppose David Murray gave them in his reports because I gather that the Doctor who told him about appendicitis was the same who signed the report in the file.' The story that Smillie died from appendicitis was, Kopp insists, 'absolutely imaginary'. Kopp ends his statement with the injunction that it remain confidential.

Of course, this statement is not conclusive proof that Bob Smillie was kicked to death by his interrogators. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that Kopp would lie about such an episode, especially in view of his wish for confidentiality. The burglary inside the Special Police headquarters is just the sort of daring escapade that Kopp would have attempted (he was a member of the French Resistance during the Second World War and was flown out by the British to avoid arrest in September 1943). Moreover, the brutal beating of prisoners to extract a confession or statement was exactly what one would expect of the GPU. At the very least, Kopp's statement is another important piece of evidence concerning the death of Bob Smillie.

Greenwich. Jan. 30th 1939.

This is an account of events related to my discovery of a file containing various documents on Bob Smillie's case.

The headquarters of the Special Police who dealt with the crushing of the extreme-leftish organisations in Spain (POUM and FAI) were situated at 24, Puerta del Angel, Barcelona, in a house previously owned by the jeweler Carreras which consisted of a cellar, a ground floor and various storeys. The ground floor was occupied by the offices, while the cellar and the upper storeys mainly served as cells for keeping the prisoners before and during the process of cross-examination. The cellar comprised a spacious garage, for at least five cars, with windows looking onto a sunken mews. Beneath the cellar level there was a sort of sub-cellar, very deep, but quite small, a sort of cul de sac passage, as exists in every big house in Barcelona for the purpose of keeping the wine cool.

I was brought into the garage on July 21st 1937 and, from the very beginning, managed to get contact with the POUM people outside. A regular system of letter-carrying was established by means of the windows looking onto the mews.

On arriving in the place, I had first to go into the office of the Secretary of the Commissar in charge of the Department (the latter being at that time called Barba) to get card-indexed and while answering the routine questions about my age, place of birth, etc., I happened to notice an open filing cabinet behind the back of the Secretary and saw in it, among others, two files bearing on their backs one 'Abramovitch alias Marc Rein' and the other 'Bob Smillie'. The other files bore Spanish or foreign names unknown to me. There was but a little number of files, 40 or so, and I gathered that they were the most important cases, kept in the Chief's secretary's own office, the bulk of the archives being probably kept in some other room.

The Police started cross-examining me on Spt. 5th 1937, after Frankford's letter got into the press. They wanted me to help them to establish the supposed connections between the POUM, the ILP and Franco or the Gestapo, and, particularly, to give evidence as to the role played by the Party in the uprising in May. Of course, I could and would not be of any use to them in that way and, after exerting various kinds of moral pressure, they made the cross-examination reach its climax on Sept. 28th when they offered me to be put in liberty and get a lieutenant-colonel's commission the same day provided I would sign two papers which were put before me. One was a form to join the Communist Party and the other a libelous and fully untrue statement against the POUM, the ILP, the 29th Division and various persons I knew. Should I not sign within the 24 hours, I should be shot.

I knew this was not a mere threat; at those times, the Police were suppressing people quite often and I had seen but a few weeks before 3 prisoners being led to the sub-cellar under the garage and heard them shot there; I saw the corpses taken out half an hour later on stretchers.

In the night of Sept. 28th, I burglarized the Secretary's office and took away both files mentioned above. This was made comparatively easy by the Spanish sentries being regularly a-sleep in the early morning. At 5 a.m. on Sept. 29th, I was in possession of both dossiers and safely back in the garage. The messenger who fetched my correspondence was due at 7 a.m. and I made a parcel addressed to my mother's in Brussels with a letter telling her to keep the dossiers carefully and to deliver them to Fenner Brockway of the ILP should she learn I was dead or after 3 months elapsed without her hearing anything from me. The parcel contained a short note for Fenner saying more or less, that I was in a frightful danger, that I had managed to steal the 2 dossiers and that I wanted them published at once if it would be known that I have been killed.

An outer wrapping was addressed to George Tioli, Hotel Victoria, Barcelona, who since my arrest used to forward my messages out of Spain by means of the Turkish Consulate's diplomatic bag. The next day I learned from my messenger that the parcel had duly been delivered to the Hotel where a man described as a 'portier' had it sent up to Tioli's room, the latter having not come down at 7.30 a.m.

When I reached France after my release, on Dec. 14th 1938, I learned that my mother never received the parcel with the dossiers and that Tioli had 'disappeared' since the 31st of July 1937 together with a man called Erwin Wolf. There is no evidence that Tioli has actually been arrested and killed, although it is highly probable; I never saw him nor heard anything said about him in any of the secret GPU prisons in which I have been (17 in all). Prisoners used to be shifted from one place to another quite often, so it rather surprises me that I should never have had any information about Tioli. I suppose that the Police did not recuperate the dossiers (which would have been automatically the case, had Tioli been arrested) because the attitude of the Police towards me never changed; as late as April 24th 1938, I was cross-examined for the last time and personally interviewed by the head of the GPU in Spain, a Polish Jew called Shaya Kindermann; my former threats about publishing the dossiers, threats which I had made to the Police on Sept. 29th 1937 as a sort of 'blackmail' and which have actually saved me from being destroyed, would have been treated with contempt had the Police known that my parcel had been intercepted.

So a theory remains, according to which Tioli left the Victoria and hid in Barcelona, without losing contact with somebody on the Hotel's staff and without being actually arrested; his 'disappearance' would then be a voluntary one. My parcel has not been forwarded to Brussels either because Tioli could no longer perform such things, or because the Turkish Consulate did not fulfill his part of the work for some reason or other. Maybe the parcel still exists in charge of some maid among other belongings of George Tioli.

I wrote a report about all this and, particularly, about the dossier 'Marc Rein' for the use of Mr. Abramovitch, Rein's father in Paris. Copies of this report are kept by the POUM's delegation in Paris, by Maurice Jacquier of the PSOP and by Eric Blair.

Bob Smillie's dossiers contained some 200 typewritten pages entirely about the cross examination which took place in Valencia's GPU headquarters the day of Bob's death or the day before. I had to little time to do a careful study of the document, I merely went through it. The Commissars told Bob that a Fascist plot had been discovered in England and that the ILP was compromised in it; that the English Police had found out that Fenner Brockway and John MacNair were mere Fascist agents, actually on the pay-roll of the Gestapo; that the POUM was a Fascist organisation too and was about to be crushed; so Bob, who was acknowledged as a good antifascist, had mixed with the wrong people and would surely be wanting the Police to destroy a movement which had attempted

to help Franco. They wanted him to make any statement which would prove useful as a charge against the POUM and such members of the ILP contingent who were still in Spain.

Bob replied that he was quite willing to join in any action against any Fascist organisation of spies, but that he wanted first to be shown the evidence of the ILP and the POUM Fascist plots. Such evidence was never produced and Bob was merely pressed either to make useful statements of his own, or to sign a ready-made statement which was put before him.

Bob refused to go any further and the Police told him that 'he will be taught to behave better', actually the last line of the document was the shorthand's reproduction of a threat to that effect.

The last paper in the file was a doctor's report. Apparently the 'teaching' had gone too far and Bob had to be transferred urgently to an hospital. The redaction of the doctor's report makes it clear that the medical man was instructed to save Bob at all costs because he sort of tries to establish the material impossibility of that aim and to get exonerated of any responsibility in the case.

The doctor states that Bob had the skin and the flesh of his belly perforated by a powerful kick delivered by a foot shod in a nailed boot; the intestines were partly hanging outside. Another blow had severed the left side connection between the jaw and the skull and the former was merely hanging on the right side. Bob died about 30 minutes after reaching the Hospital and nothing could be done to save him, although they gave him plenty of morphia to alleviate the pain.

On reaching the Segorbe concentration camp in early January 1938, I met a German Anarcho-syndicalist called Gustav Doster who knew about Bob's case. If I remember well, he was in Hospital when Bob was brought there, or told of the latter's arrival by somebody who was there. In any case, his story was more or less identical to what I had previously learned from the dossier. Gustv Doster is now staying in Sweden and can probably be approached through the Swedish Anarcho-syndicalist organisation. As Doster was supposed to be released soon after our meeting (he actually got his freedom in March 1938), I instructed him to tell our people in Paris about my discoveries, which he did.

Unfortunately, I cannot remember the names of the Doctor and of the Hospital, but I suppose David Murray gave them in his reports because I gather that the Doctor who told him about the apendicitis was the same who signed the report in the file. The apendicitis appears, of course, as absolutely imaginary.

This report is for strictly private use and, as agreed between John MacNair, Fenner Brockway and myself, will only be published if at all, after communicating with me again. In any case, the names of the persons who hold copies of my report on Marc Rein's dossier should *never* be published. Copies of the present report are sent out to the same 3 places.

Georges Kopp