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Obituary

Netherlands – Maurice Ferares (1922-2022) always in resistance

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We received the news that Maurice Ferares passed away on 18 December 2022. Maurice was politically active throughout his adult life in the revolutionary socialist movement. We lose in him an extremely committed comrade, who always and everywhere fought against injustice and for socialism.

Maurice was one of the last surviving participants in the "February strike," the famous strike in Amsterdam and the Zaan region against Nazi persecution of Jews in February 1941. The story of his life connects us to a whole world of political struggles of the European labor movement of the last century, from the struggle against Nazism to solidarity with anti-colonial revolutions in the Global South.

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When Dutch Workers Took a Stand Against Nazi Genocide

On this day in 1941, Dutch workers went on strike in solidarity with Jews facing Nazi persecution. Maurice Ferares is one of the strike's last surviving organizers, and his life of activism links him to some of the last century's great political struggles.

The Dutch Jewish socialist Maurice Ferares turned a hundred in January this year. Ferares is one of the last surviving participants of the famous Amsterdam strike against the Nazi persecution of the Jews in February 1941. The story of his life links us to a whole world of political struggle in the European workers' movement of the last century, from the fight against Nazism to solidarity with anti-colonial revolutions in the Global South.

Ferares was born into a poor Jewish family during the interwar years. His father was a shoemaker whose workshop took up part of the small family home, and Ferares shared a room with his parents until he was eighteen. They wanted the young Ferares to become a professional musician, hoping that it would offer him an escape route from poverty. When his friends were playing soccer or watching movies, Ferares had to practice the violin.

His father also made him attend a Jewish religious school, which opened connections to wealthier members of the Jewish community. His father hoped that this would enable him to continue his studies, and Ferares did eventually receive a scholarship from a Jewish association.

At the age of sixteen, Ferares took his conservatory exam. His parents now envisaged a successful career for their son. However, in May 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands, sending his life onto a different path.

Joining the Resistance

Ferares had grown up among socialists and communists and heard stories about Nazism from German refugees. “After Trotsky’s exile and the Moscow trials, my father felt no sympathy for Stalin’s movement,” he recalled. Still, every week his father would donate a few pennies to “Uncle Guus,” a German communist making his rounds to collect money for the International Red Aid, an organization that helped victims of political persecution. One day, Uncle Guus stopped coming: the Dutch police had deported him back to Nazi Germany.

A few months after the occupation began, Ferares was asked to give violin lessons to a friend of a friend from music school, the artist Cor Winkel, who would paint his portrait in lieu of payment. Winkel was a member of the underground Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN), which had begun to publish illegal leaflets and agitate among Dutch workers.

In the early stages of the war, with the Hitler-Stalin pact still in place, the CPN leadership insisted that the war was between two imperialist camps and the working class should remain “strictly neutral.” However, the experience of the occupation meant that opposition to the Nazis became the central issue in practice for many Communists.

After he had showed his reliability by doing some small jobs for the party, the CPN invited Ferares to join. He did not need much convincing. The Nazis had already introduced the first antisemitic measures, such as banning Jews from all public functions. The members of his party cell included Cor Winkel, as well as the friend who had introduced him to Winkel, a hairdresser, and a young nurse called Tinie.

Unlike the others, Tinie did not survive the war. Ferares did not know much about her, her reasons for joining the party, or even if Tinie was her real name: “You did not ask your comrades in the underground such questions.” One afternoon, Tinie was caught putting up CPN posters with another comrade called Joop. Two police officers arrested Joop but initially let Tinie go.

The combination of direct Nazi rule, an efficient state bureaucracy, and Dutch security forces that for the most part loyally carried out the orders of their new masters, made the Netherlands an extremely dangerous place for Jews.

She decided she could not abandon her comrade and threw the can filled with glue at the cops. They were startled, perhaps thinking that Tinie had thrown a grenade, and Joop was able to escape. Unfortunately, Tinie tripped while running away and was captured. As Ferares remembered: “We quickly learned where she was imprisoned and that she was terribly abused. She never said anything about our activities and did not disclose our names or identities.” The Nazis executed her in prison.

The occupiers had put the Netherlands under the direct control of a governor, instead of ruling through a collaborationist regime like Vichy France. The combination of direct rule, an efficient state bureaucracy, and Dutch security forces that for the most part loyally carried out the orders of their new masters, made the Netherlands an extremely dangerous place for Jews. Only a quarter of Dutch Jews would survive the war — a much smaller proportion than in Belgium or France.

The flat, unforested, and densely populated landscape also did not offer many opportunities for sanctuary or guerrilla combat. Yet people still engaged in various forms of resistance. At some point during the occupation, more than three hundred thousand people went into hiding from the Nazis, including Jews, political activists, and people avoiding forced labor in Germany. These *onderduikers* (hideaways) needed shelter, food, ration cards, and other kinds of support.

As Ferares put it:

Especially at the beginning, the possibilities for armed resistance were very limited. Spreading information through pamphlets and illegal journals and calling for passive resistance and strengthening of morale in opposition to the continuous German intimidation were the main forms of resistance, in addition to aiding people in hiding and the families of victims.

As well as distributing illegal pamphlets, Ferares stole ration cards so people in hiding could obtain food and helped forge official papers, becoming in his own words “a skilled burglar and con man.”

The Amsterdam Strike

The CPN’s underground activities played a key role in the strike of February 25–26, 1941. Dutch Nazis were becoming increasingly violent under German protection, marching through Jewish neighborhoods and left-wing strongholds. They attacked Jews in the streets, threw them off public transport, or broke into their homes and stole their possessions. Tensions were especially high in Amsterdam, with its large Jewish community.

In his history of the Dutch Jews under the occupation, Ondergang, Jacques Presser identified two important developments. First of all, Jews began organizing to defend themselves in fighting groups. They mostly came from humble backgrounds, “small merchants, peddlers, vendors, working people.” Secondly, as Presser wrote, they received support from “non-Jewish Dutch people with a similar social background.” People drew on existing social connections, such as the membership of the Jewish boxing club Maccabi.

Jewish self-defense groups met attempts at violent intimidation with resistance, beating up Nazis, and sometimes throwing them into Amsterdam’s canals.

These self-defense groups met attempts at violent intimidation with resistance, beating up Nazis, and sometimes throwing them into Amsterdam’s canals. A particularly fierce clash took place on February 11, 1941, and one Dutch Nazi was killed. The occupation forces retaliated by arresting scores of Jewish citizens and indiscriminately assaulting people who were thought to be Jewish.

Several groups suggested that workers should go on strike in solidarity with the Jews. The underground Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg-Front, the continuation of Henk Sneevliet’s Revolutionary Socialist Workers’ Party, circulated a pamphlet celebrating the resistance to antisemitic violence and calling for a strike. The CPN leadership also concluded that conditions were ripe for action. Roughly twelve hundred of the party’s two thousand underground members lived in Amsterdam.

On February 25, Communist activists addressed a meeting of municipal workers, and the combative atmosphere convinced local party members that now was the time. That evening, the party produced a leaflet with a headline that would become iconic: “Strike! Strike! Strike!”

The Communists themselves were surprised by the rapid response to their call, as protest spread through the city. When local police attempted to disperse the crowds, people responded by throwing stones. Ferares and his comrades joined groups that forced trams to stop and overturned the cars to block the lines.

The authorities mobilized German forces to smash the strike. They opened fire on the crowds and threw hand grenades, killing at least thirteen people on the evening of February 26 and wounding dozens more. The repression effectively broke the strike, and there was a renewed hunt for Communists and other left-wing activists in the aftermath.

Carrying on with his musical studies was hardly a priority for Ferares at the time, and in any case, the Nazis excluded all Jewish students in the early months of 1942. With persecution of the Jews intensifying, Ferares decided that he needed to go into hiding. That very day, July 15, 1942, saw the first deportation of 1,137 Jews from the Netherlands for the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

It was only after liberation that Ferares discovered the Nazis had murdered his entire family during the war. Every day he checked the lists of those whose deaths had now been confirmed, until eventually, he found the names of his relatives there.

Restoring the Empire

By his own account, Ferares was a “Stalinist through and through” during the war. He followed the party line, defending the Hitler-Stalin pact and the later dissolution of the Communist International by Stalin in 1943 as clever tricks in the class war.

He knew that there were other left-wing radicals who took different positions. A member of the Trotskyist Committee of Revolutionary Marxists, a continuation of the Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg-Front, had provided with him false papers. According to Ferares, he appreciated the solidarity, but continued to see the repression of Trotskyists and other dissidents in the Soviet Union as a tragic necessity.

There was a general sense among CPN members, he recalled, that there might be a revolutionary eruption in Europe after World War II, just as there had been after the 1914–18 conflict. But they did not spend much time pondering such questions:

> *We had only vague ideas of what the post-war government should look like, and neither did we know how the workers could take power. We did not pause to think about this. First, the fascists needed to be beaten.*

But party publications seemed more interested in maintaining an alliance with what they called the “democratic bourgeoisie” than in propagating anti-capitalist revolution. Ferares was even more concerned when Stalin delayed the advance of the Red Army outside Warsaw in July 1944, enabling the Nazis to crush the city’s uprising: “Was this not a betrayal of the Polish peasants and workers?”

After the German surrender, there was unprecedented goodwill toward the Communist Party of the Netherlands because of the bravery shown by many of its members during the occupation.

After the German surrender in May 1945, there was unprecedented goodwill toward the CPN because of the bravery shown by many of its members during the occupation. The party leadership hoped it could now play a more prominent role in Dutch parliamentary politics. But preserving the wartime popular front required the Communists to sacrifice central points of their program so as not to repel their liberal allies.

In the Dutch case, one central issue was imperialism. On August 17, 1945, the Indonesian leaders Mohammad Hatta and Sukarno declared an independent Indonesian Republic after centuries of colonial rule. But the Dutch government went to war in a bid to retain control over the archipelago and would not recognize Indonesian independence until the end of 1949.

Dutch troops burned down villages, tortured and executed prisoners, and carried out massacres of civilians. This colonial war killed more than a hundred thousand Indonesians by the most conservative estimates, with many more dying as a result of hunger and disease.

The social democrats of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) were part of the government coalition throughout the war,

despite having pledged never to support colonial warfare in 1946. The PvdA leader Willem Drees served as prime minister after August 1948. The party leadership shut down attempts to organize resistance to the war among its members, and thousands left the party.

For its part, while the Communist Party opposed Dutch military operations in Indonesia, it refrained from calling for independence, fretting instead about “disastrous” developments that could lead to a “complete loss of Indonesia.” The party called for a commonwealth between Indonesia and the Netherlands instead of separation. The party newspaper even carried recruitment ads for Dutch forces in Indonesia.

Ferares criticized this retreat from traditional anti-colonial positions at a meeting of Amsterdam party activists. In response, the CPN leader Paul De Groot branded him as a fascist, despite his five years of dangerous underground work. This prompted him to leave the party.

Networks of Solidarity

Soon afterward, Ferares joined the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), a Trotskyist group that developed from the Committee of Revolutionary Marxists. The RCP was a small organization, with a couple of hundred members at most, but it was the only party to unconditionally support Indonesian independence.

In September 1946, thousands of Dutch workers joined a spontaneous strike against the dispatch of soldiers to Indonesia.

A poll conducted in July 1946 revealed that more than 40 percent of the population opposed sending troops to Indonesia. The following month, large protests broke out in Amsterdam, and the police responded with violence, killing one demonstrator. In September of that year, thousands of workers joined a spontaneous strike against the dispatch of soldiers.

The RCP hoped to attract disappointed social democrats and communists, but it was too small to seem like a realistic alternative. Ferares ran unsuccessfully as an election candidate, but the RCP never came close to winning any seats. He had more success as a trade unionist, becoming the secretary of the Dutch musicians’ union in 1956.

Ferares found one of his early tasks as secretary very painful. Striking Hollywood musicians contacted the union to ask their Dutch colleagues to boycott a film that was being shot in Amsterdam: *The Diary of Anne Frank*. As Ferares put it: “No Dutch musician was involved in making it. But you can understand how difficult this was for me.”

In the late 1950s, Ferrares welcomed the Greek Trotskyist leader Michel Raptis — better known as Michel Pablo — and his wife Hélène in his home. Raptis had helped organize a network of support for the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) when the main French left-wing parties opposed Algerian independence. The network helped raise money and distribute the FLN’s underground publication in France.

Its members were also involved in smuggling papers, money, and sometimes weapons. Pablo arranged for left-wing activists with relevant skills to go to Morocco, where they produced arms for the FLN in secret factories. Ferares said that some of his Dutch comrades were involved, although he described his own contribution to this effort as “nothing more than office work.”

A Player in the Orchestra

Ferares remained active in solidarity work over subsequent years, organizing support for anti-colonial struggles in countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. He carried on as secretary of his trade union until he was seventy, and still edited its publication after stepping down. In 1991, he published a memoir of his wartime years with the title *A Violin Player in the Resistance*, and also wrote novels and poetry, often inspired by the events of his own life, as well as another nonfiction book, a critical study of the Dutch left and the Indonesian independence struggle.

A 1976 Dutch intelligence report described Ferares as someone who had been unable to find much support for his Trotskyist ideas, but whose continuous activity “allows him to play his own part in the orchestra of the Dutch radical left.” The struggle against colonialism and all its legacies remained central to his political engagement. He spoke out in favor of Palestinian self-determination, calling for a single, democratic state with equal rights for all, and denouncing Israel as an apartheid regime.

Late in life, he was still active as a member of the Komite Utang Kehormatan Belanda (Dutch Debt of Honor Committee). This is an organization that has fought with some success for legal recognition of, and compensation for, the crimes of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia.

Looking back on his life, Ferares said that he “never regretted my activities in the past, but I do regret sometimes how comrades fought each other — the sectarian behavior, the name-calling that accompanied conflicts.” It was his wartime years that had left him “deeply scarred . . . my political activities cannot be separated from that.” He always remembered the victims of Nazism: “I was able to save my skin and every day, I steal a day from Hitler by staying alive.”

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