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Reviews

The Revolutionary Life and Times of Michel Pablo

- Reviews section -

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The Greek revolutionary Michel Pablo had a remarkable, globe-spanning career, from wartime resistance activity to his work supplying weapons and finance for the Algerian independence struggle. He's finally gotten the biography he deserves.

Michel Pablo may be a little-known figure today, but Hall Greenland has done justice to his life as a committed fighter against capitalism and colonialism on several continents in his book, *The Well-Dressed Revolutionary*. As the book's subtitle indicates, Greenland weaves together Pablo's story with the wider backdrop of revolution and counterrevolution in the twentieth century.

Pablo's real name was Michalis Raptis. Born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria in 1911 to Greek parents, he grew up in Crete and became active in communist circles while studying to become a civil engineer. During the 1930s, he joined Leon Trotsky's Fourth International and adopted his nom de guerre Pablo.

His record of political engagement took him from the anti-Nazi resistance in wartime France to a role supplying weapons to the Algerian independence struggle two decades later. He worked as an adviser for Algeria's first postcolonial president, Ahmed Ben Bella, and the Chilean socialist government of Salvador Allende.

Pablo was only able to return to his home country after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. He more or less settled down as a public left-wing figure, writing for progressive Greek newspapers. When he died at the age of eighty-four in 1996, the PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) government gave him a state funeral.

Troublemakers

In 1937, the authoritarian regime of General Ioannis Metaxas arrested the young revolutionary and shipped him off to a prison island. The prisoners had a certain level of autonomy, but Pablo and his partner H el ene "Elly" Diovousiotis, an activist in her own right, became known as "troublemakers." They were separated and Pablo was put in prison.

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After a few weeks, his jailers dragged Pablo to the office of the minister of internal security, where one of Pablo's professors as well as his father were waiting for him. All that Pablo needed to do to secure his release was to sign a declaration denouncing communism. When he refused, his exasperated professor exclaimed: "You see what a blockhead he is, let him go to the Devil. Let him go abroad and leave us in peace." Pablo was given papers and told to leave Greece.

In 1938, Pablo and Elly ended up in France. During the war, Pablo oversaw the printery of the Trotskyist Parti Ouvrier Internationaliste (International Workers' Party). This work was extremely dangerous: not only were France's Nazi occupiers and their Vichy collaborators hunting for Trotskyist militants, but several of Pablo's comrades were also murdered by the Stalinists.

Things were even worse in his native Greece, where armed units of the Greek Communist Party executed scores of

Trotskyists and other dissident communists during and after the wartime struggle against Nazism. Stalinists justified the use of assassination as a weapon against their rivals in the workers' movement with the false claim that Trotsky's followers were collaborating with fascism.

Even under such circumstances, Pablo was able to play a central role in bringing the scattered followers of Trotskyism together and became one of the central leaders of the movement. However, the Trotskyists struggled to find their footing in the postwar years.

Trotsky had predicted that the war would fatally weaken Stalinism. Having failed to prevent the Nazis from gaining power in Germany, Stalinism had, in his eyes, proved its historical bankruptcy, thus opening the road to a new mass revolutionary movement, the Fourth International (FI).

The exiled Bolshevik also saw little chance that capitalism would recover from the economic crisis of the 1930s and the subsequent war. As he wrote in the program of the FI: "The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only 'ripened,' they have begun to get somewhat rotten."

However, the state and movement led by Joseph Stalin emerged from the war stronger than ever. Meanwhile, with the help of US aid, European capitalism not only recovered but started to grow, entering into a long postwar boom. Pablo was early to recognize such unexpected developments.

Pablo criticized some fellow leaders of the FI such as the Belgian Ernest Mandel for attitudes that he would later describe as Eurocentric. In Pablo's eyes, they emphasized the role of the organized working class in the developed capitalist states but did not recognize the importance and global reach of the anti-colonial revolutions that were unfolding in the postwar decades.

Personal experience must have played a role in this disagreement. Pablo was born in Egypt and raised in Greece, a state on Europe's periphery. Mandel, on the other hand, grew up in one of the first countries to industrialize. There were major working-class struggles in Belgium during the 1950s and '60s, including a general strike.

But Pablo was right about the world-historical importance of the anti-colonial struggles and their ramifications. In France, opposition to the colonial war in Algeria was one of the sparks that eventually led to the explosion of May–June 1968. The struggle in Vietnam came to symbolize the global potential of struggles against imperialism and neocolonialism, while today, the Palestinian struggle is an important radicalizing factor.

Revolution in Algeria

As Greenland shows, the Algerian revolution was a key episode for Pablo. In June 1960, he was arrested in Amsterdam along with Sal Santen, the son-in-law of the executed revolutionary Henk Sneevliet. Although Dutch authorities tried to present Santen and Pablo as ordinary criminals, the two men were taken into custody because of the aid they supplied to the Algerian independence movement, the Front de libération nationale (FLN).

When the FLN began its armed struggle against French colonialism in 1954, the main parties of the French left gave it no support. The Socialists were part of the government coalition, while the Communists voted in favor of special powers for the government to suppress the uprising. Looking for allies, left-wing leaders of the FLN turned to the small Fourth International.

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By this time, Pablo was one of the FI's central leaders, a member of what was called the International Secretariat. He was eager to respond to the Algerian request for aid. Whereas previously, the Trotskyists had largely attempted to operate as an opposition current in larger movements, organizing solidarity with the Algerian struggle would give the FI a chance to put its politics into practice under its own banner.

Obviously, supporting an armed uprising against one of the major European powers was not without risks. Yet Pablo was not easily deterred and he set out to organize support from his base in Amsterdam, living on the floor above the apartment of his comrade Maurice Ferares, a former member of the anti-Nazi resistance.

Pablo did not inform the rest of the FI leadership about the details of what he was doing. He had good reasons for maintaining secrecy. Throughout Europe, supporters of the FLN were targeted by state security forces as well as far-right groups such as the Organisation de l'armée secrète, a shadowy movement with ties to the French military.

The European supporters of the FLN became known as "suitcase carriers." They transported documents, underground publications, and sometimes weapons as well as money collected to support the struggle, often donated by Algerian workers based in Europe. At the same time, Pablo was looking for additional ways to aid the Algerian struggle.

Initially, he proposed to organize international volunteers on the model of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. While the FLN rejected this proposal, he was able to put into effect another ambitious plan by setting up an arms factory in Morocco to produce much-needed weapons.

One of Pablo's comrades involved in this undertaking was the metalworker Max "Mokhtar" Plekker. In a 2005 interview, the aging revolutionary remembered the first day he woke up to the sound of the Islamic call for prayer: "It was very clear to me that I was in another part of the world."

In military terms, the guns put together by Mokhtar and his comrades were of negligible importance compared to the arms acquired on the European market or those that came from the eastern bloc. However, the arms factory was of considerable political importance since it was tangible proof of international solidarity.

Forging Solidarity

Another daring project led to the arrest of Pablo and Santen. At the end of 1958, the French government was about to replace the old 10,000 franc note with a new 100 franc one. It seemed an ideal opportunity for the FLN to counterfeit the new notes as they were still unfamiliar to the public. As an added bonus, Greenland notes, "forged banknotes being passed around by tens of thousands of Algerians working in France (135,000 of them were members of the FLN) could prove a major disruption to the French economy."

The FLN asked Pablo, who was already involved in the forging of papers for FLN members and supporters, for help. However, without consulting Pablo or Santen, their counterfeiting specialist also approached the Dutch adventurer Joop Zwart, a former socialist who had become an informer for the intelligence services. It was probably Zwart who betrayed the operation to the authorities.

The arrest of the two men came as a surprise to the FI. Pablo had kept the operation so well hidden that even some of his close comrades were unaware that he was leading these activities. The authorities seized on the counterfeiting

plan to claim that the two were ordinary criminals rather than political activists.

In Algeria, Pablo became an advisor to the country's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella.

What followed was an ugly episode. When Ferares — who only learned of the counterfeiting operation after the arrests — informed the FI leadership of what happened, he summed up their reaction as follows: “A leader of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, arrested for the low crime of counterfeiting!” Ferares had no time for such a response — “if that is the vanguard of the revolution . . .”

According to Pablo, Ernest Mandel knew about the broad outlines of the operation at least. Mandel denied this, claiming that he would never have agreed to such a risky operation. Pablo felt let down, even betrayed. What had previously been a deep political disagreement now also became a bitter personal conflict.

The arrest of Santen and Pablo led to an international solidarity campaign. Expressions of support for the prisoners came from Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in France, along with the Chilean socialist leader Salvador Allende, the Sri Lankan dockers' union, dozens of British Labour MPs, the Dutch Labour Party senator George Cammelbeeck, and many others.

What at first seemed to have been a defeat turned into a political victory, bringing new attention to the Algerian struggle and enabling the small Fourth International to be recognized as a dedicated supporter of it. In the end, Santen and Raptis were sentenced to fifteen months in prison, having already spent twelve months on remand before their trial.

After his release from prison, Pablo moved to Algeria with Elly. Although he was formally still a member of the Fourth International, he increasingly went his own way, eventually leaving to form his own international organization.

In Algeria, Pablo became an advisor to the country's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella. Pablo developed his ideas about the role of workers' self-management in a socialist democracy. He had high hopes that Algeria could evolve in this direction but saw the left-wing currents in the FLN steadily pushed aside by more conservative forces. Ben Bella wavered as Pablo sought to convince him to pursue a more radical approach.

Pablo had seen great potential in Ben Bella, who used socialist rhetoric in power and sought to make Algeria a leading power in the struggle against colonialism. But in 1965, a coup led by Defense Minister Houari Boumédiène ousted Ben Bella. Pablo and Elly were forced to leave the country along with other left-wing activists.

Pablo's political opponents sometimes accused him of longing to be “advisor to the prince.” This was unjust — for one thing, the people who Pablo tried to influence were hardly princes. But at times, Pablo did have unduly high expectations of established leaderships, from the Ben Bella experience and supposedly “anti-imperialist leaderships” elsewhere to his hope that communist parties in the eastern bloc would be able to reform themselves.

Self-Management

The following decades saw Pablo and Elly move across Europe and Latin America. Pablo's talent for sensing the importance of new developments made him an early supporter of the ecological movement as well as the cause of women's liberation.

Pablo stressed the need for self-management of workers, not only as a necessary component of an established socialist system, but also during the struggle for socialism. He recognized that workers rebel not only for higher wages but also to gain more control more over their lives and to resist the domination to which they are subjected in the workplace.

Ernest Mandel made a similar argument when he wrote about working-class struggles being motivated by the experience of laboring under the command of a hierarchy which dictates to the worker what and how they produce, “what to consume and when to consume it, what to think and when to think it, what to dream and when to dream it, giving alienation new and dreadful dimensions.”

There were other points of convergence between Pablo and Mandel, despite the sharp differences between them: for example, they both came to argue that a future revolutionary movement would have to bring together different groups and currents, instead of being built from a single organization. One wonders what might have been possible if the conflict between the two had not escalated in the way that it did.

Greenland’s account of Pablo’s break with his former comrades is a useful reminder that political conflicts are often not just about politics, but also about personal ties, trust, and disappointment. At the very end of his life, in a mostly symbolic gesture, Pablo rejoined the Fourth International.

A Revolutionary Odyssey

Pablo would not have been able to live the life that he did without the support of his partner Elly. Like Pablo, she refused to sign the pledge renouncing communism in the 1930s, choosing exile along with him. By that time Elly, who came from a wealthy and respected family, had already broken with the Greek Communist Party, reportedly telling its male leaders that “we bourgeois treat our servants better than you treat your wives.”

In his autobiography, Sal Santen included an anecdote that was revealing about Elly’s character and her bond with Pablo. At a meeting of the FI leadership, one of its leaders demanded that Elly, the only woman in the room, tone down her criticism of him, accusing her of “undermining” his position in the eyes of the working class: “You don’t need me for that,” she shot back. The meeting degenerated into shouting, with other participants demanding that Elly, who was formally not a member, leave the room. Pablo got up, insisting that they would either stay or leave together, and the matter was dropped.

A life as tumultuous as that of Pablo makes for gripping reading. Greenland tells the story in an engaging and colorful style from a perspective that is sympathetic without being uncritical, taking us on a journey through the twentieth-century radical left, witnessing its high hopes and deep disappointments.

[Jacobin](#)

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