

# **Last: Author, Activist, Outcast.**

An inquiry into Jef Last's relationship with communism in the 1930s

By

Lucas Pieter Frits van Oppen

S1261134



**Universiteit Leiden**

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## **Abstract**

Josephus ('Jef') Carel Franciscus Last (1898-1972) was a Dutch leftist writer, polyglot, and Spanish Civil War volunteer. Though he never became an influential name in Dutch literature in the same way some of his contemporaries managed to, he did maintain several high-profile intellectual friendships across Europe and the Dutch East Indies. He was moreover one of the most dynamic leftists from the Netherlands during the 1930s, travelling to many different countries, as well as constantly developing his precise political allegiances, often leading him to joining new political movements and organisations. This MA thesis is concerned with how this development of his political allegiance precisely materialised, and whether his experiences in the Spanish Civil War definitively cemented his disillusionment with communism towards the late 1930s.

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With an oblique eye to the time of writing it seems fitting to conclude these messages of gratitude with a rallying cry from a while ago, applicable as ever to the present;

¡No Pasaran!

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
List of Abbreviations & Glossary of Terms .....	4
Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1 – Jef Last, Friend of the Soviet Union   1934-35.....	15
Jef Last before 1934 – From boy scout to leftist radical.....	15
April 1934 - December 1935 – Meeting André Gide.....	20
Concluding Remarks on Chapter 1: inklings of a pattern .....	25
Chapter 2 – <i>El Capitán</i> Jef Last   1936-37.....	27
January-August 1936 – Antwerp and the fourth Soviet journey .....	27
September 1936- January 1937 – The Madrilenian front.....	29
February-November 1937 – In service of the Republic? .....	37
Concluding Remarks on Chapter 2 – Cementing the disaffection .....	44
Chapter 3 – Antifascist, Stateless and Isolated   1938-39 .....	46
February-June 1938 – Teruel and emigration plans .....	46
July 1938- late 1939 – Omens of the Second World War .....	48
Concluding Remarks on Chapter 3 – Final Break.....	52
Conclusion .....	53
Breaking with communism: a pattern explained.....	53
Bibliography .....	57
Primary Sources .....	57
Secondary Sources.....	58

## **List of Abbreviations & Glossary of Terms**

<b>CPH/CPN</b>	Communistische Partij Holland/Communistische Partij Nederland.
<b>CPSU</b>	Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
<b>CTV</b>	Corpo Truppe Volontarie.
<b>GPU</b>	Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoye Upravlenie.
<b>IRH</b>	Internationale Rode Hulp/International Red Help.
<b>ITF/ITWF</b>	Internationale Transportwerkers Federatie/International Transport Workers' Federation.
<b>IVRS</b>	Internationale Vereinigung revolutionärer Schriftsteller.
<b>LAI</b>	League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression.
<b>NAS</b>	Nationaal Arbeiders-Secretariaat.
<b>NKVD</b>	Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del.
<b>PCE</b>	Partido Comunista de Espana.
<b>POUM</b>	Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista.
<b>PSOE</b>	Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol.
<b>RSAP</b>	Revolutionair-Socialistische Arbeiderspartij.
<b>SA</b>	Sturmabteilung.
<b>SS</b>	Schutzstaffel.
<b>SDAP</b>	Sociaaldemocratische Arbeiderspartij.
<b>VVSU</b>	Vrienden van de Sovjet-Unie.

## Introduction

Josephus (‘Jef’) Carel Franciscus Last (1898-1972) was a Dutch leftist writer, polyglot, and Spanish Civil War volunteer. Though he never became an influential name in Dutch literature in the same way some of his contemporaries managed to, he did consort extensively within the European cultural intelligentsia of the Interbellum. Last’s political and literary life spans more than half a century, from 1918 to 1972, of which the most volatile and arguably most important and therefore interesting period therein is the 1930s. Between 1930 and 1940 Last was a member of no less than seven different political organisations and four different literary associations, made four journeys to the Soviet Union, conducted at least four more propaganda journeys to other European countries, fought in Spain for thirteen months, and wrote six novels whilst contributing to several more works by other authors. In combination with his many fiction and non-fiction publications, his letters and diary notes paint an extremely colourful and at times highly detailed account of a dynamic and querulous intellectual in permanent ideological flux on the left side of the spectrum.

The objective of this thesis is hence to figure out how exactly Jef Last’s position on communism changed throughout the 1930s. The general hypothesis that emerges from previous scholarship is that Last turned away from the Dutch communist party in 1938 and that this act constituted his final disillusionment with the movement. It is my contention that this hypothesis is correct on the surface, but that Last’s actions before 1936 suggest otherwise, and his actions during the Spanish Civil War can corroborate that. The main research question of this thesis is therefore: how did Jef Last’s disaffection with communism and his consequential distancing from it materialise?

This MA thesis seeks to further the cause of several different debates. Overall, I will contend that it contributes to one extremely narrow debate which is in turn a sub-debate of a slightly wider academic debate. The extremely narrow debate concerns Jef Last, a writer and one of about six-hundred Dutch Spanish Civil War volunteers that fought for the Second Republic. The debate on Last as an individual is held between four scholars, who in five articles have intensively studied his experiences before, during, and after fighting in Spain. These studies, in turn, can be considered a sub-debate of the broader historical debate on the Dutch/Flemish participants in the Spanish Civil War. This debate contains – including the studies on Jef Last – contains roughly twenty publications, made by some thirty scholars in total. Both debates span the period from 1982 to present day, interspersed with spells of inactivity or dormancy especially during the 1990s.

The debate on Jef Last at present is founded on four different articles, by exclusively Dutch authors. The first article of note – in French – is “*El Capitán Jef Last. Un écrivain Néerlandais sur le front Espagnol*” by Marleen Rensen. Her 2014 account of Jef Last’s time volunteering in the Spanish Civil War is by and large the most coherent and dependable scholarly work of the four. In it she paints a holistic image of Last as a supremely socialist writer of bourgeois stock, with a knack for languages, that leaned heavily on his friendship with the famous André Gide. She singles out Last as a unique example of utopian socialist writership and contends that even though he may have publicly denounced his faith in that utopianism he pursued it ardently until his death. This way of viewing Last’s political and literary views in conjunction is substantiated by extensive sourcing in the correspondence between Last and his wife yet produces more of a narrative of mentality than a history of Last’s political development. Nevertheless, Rensen’s article touches upon all the themes and relationships, building an effective and holistic account of Last’s time in

the Spanish Civil War. Her position on the role of the Spanish Civil War in Last's life is that it gave him final cause to end his membership of the CPN, and that it fuelled his complete disappointment with the Soviet Union, even in later life.<sup>1</sup>

The second article that underpins the scholarship on Jef Last is by Jan Willem Stutje and originates in the early- to mid-1990s. Stutje's "Tussen Hoop en Angst: De Communistische Jaren van Jef Last" details the 1930-1938 period of Last's life, exploring his political positioning during his membership of the Communistische Partij Holland (CPH<sup>2</sup>) – the Dutch communist party – and his volunteering in Spain. Stutje focusses extensively on the communications between Last and his political superiors in Spain (e.g. Ludwig Renn of the XI International Brigade) and is the only of the scholars listed here has picked up on the more serious embellishments of the truth that Last employed in *Mijn Vriend André Gide*.<sup>3</sup> Stutje is moreover the only scholar to produce a clear factual account of the interactions between Last and the political commissars and secretaries of the CPH in Spain, which is in turn repeated by all the other scholarly works. Stutje's piece is dependable for key facts but cannot be exclusively relied on since it overlooks large elements of Last's inner emotional life and does not seem to pick up on Last's self-censorship after May 1937. Stutje, in line with Rensen, subscribes to the notion that Last broke with communism only in 1938, though he does concede that the 1934-37 period is riddled with disappointments and disagreements that inspired a long-winded disaffection.

The articles by third author Rudi Wester by contrast take a far broader or longer view of Last's interactions with the Party and his time in Spain. Built on the same materials that Stutje based his account on, Wester's scholarship has the benefit of being supported by personal accounts from Last himself and testimony of his next of kin as to his deeper personal feelings regarding his politics and his homosexuality. Wester produced several accounts of Last in Spain, parts of which echo Stutje, but emphasises that Last was a writer first, war volunteer second. In this vein, she qualifies Last's own description and analysis of his dispositions and relationship higher than Stutje, and constantly overlooks Last's self-censorship, producing an image of Last which is rather capricious. Wester's scholarship on Last's life overall effectively evidences the fact that he in general could behave whimsically or impulsively, even if this was politically undesirable. Wester hence has managed to produce a credible character testimony of Last motives and motivations during his life in general, which greatly aids in understanding the precise political machinations he was involved in during his time in Spain as described by Stutje and Rensen. Based on her work MA-student Robèrt Gillese produced a thesis that is primarily useful for its summary qualities, as it also incorporated critiqued versions of the publications that underpinned Wester's overall work, including the works by Dankaart and Braams et al.

In the case of Last's Spanish adventure Wester's articles make for a patchy account which is often contradictory to assertions made by Rensen and Stutje. The three authors are unable, for one, to agree on Last's precise arrival date in Spain, and only and incorrectly agree on the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Marleen Rensen. "El Capitán Jef Last. Un Écrivain Néerlandais Sur le Front Espagnol" in *Le groupe interdisciplinaire d'études nizaniennes* « Aden » no. 9 (2010), pp. 173-184

<sup>2</sup> During the 1930s the Dutch Communist Party was initially named 'Communistische Partij Nederland' and then changed to 'Communistische Partij Holland'. Its leadership decided to change the former into the latter, after finding that all of the common languages of the Comintern tended to favour 'Holland' over 'The Netherlands' in addressing their country until 1935. From the party congress of 1935 onwards, the party returned to being the 'CPN'. See Sjaak van der Velden, *Van SDB tot SP – 125 jaar socialisme in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Aksant, 2008), pp. 76-95

<sup>3</sup> Lit.: "My Friend André Gide".

he joined the famous 'Fifth Regiment' upon arrival. These three authors moreover differently value the ideological aspects of Last's break with communism. Stutje emphasises on Last's strategic view of the Soviet Union, where Rensen emphasises the irreconcilability of his bisexuality with Marxist interpretations of social freedom, and Wester focusses primarily on the irreconcilability of Last's desire for writerly and artistic freedom with the principles of socialist realism and bourgeois tendencies in Soviet society. Rensen, Stutje and Wester all consider Last's renunciation of his membership of the CPN in 1938 to be the definitive break between himself and communism, though they do assert that he remained an antifascist leftist for the duration of his life. As stated, they all individually argue that the renunciation of his CPN-membership emerged from different ideological sources; Stutje claims geopolitics, Rensen claims sexual discrimination, and Wester claims artistic censorship.

The fourth and final item of note in the scholarship on Jef Last is the 2019 article by Samuël Kruizinga titled "'The First Resisters: Tracing Three Dutchmen from the Spanish Trenches to the Second World War, 1936–1945'". In his piece on these individuals he argues that their antifascism – though consistent – was alternately decried and welcomed by authorities and kindred movements depending on their situations. Last features as first example in this article and is considered by Kruizinga to be a fringe follower of the communist movement that was also among those hardest hit by the Bolshevization, suffering especially towards the late 1930s from rejection by both the left and the Dutch authorities. Kruizinga – unusually so for scholars on Last – views him as having completely broken with communism already during the Spanish Civil War and argues that his isolation inflicted on him by both the Party and the revocation of his citizenship caused him to fall into serious depression. Though there is a measure of truth to these statements, Kruizinga's overall interpretation of the known facts about Last and his life during the 1930s and 1940s is quite often overly dissenting, and possibly merely sensationalist. Especially claims that Last and Gide were romantically involved and that Last in 1940 attempted to join the Royal Netherlands Navy are ill-substantiated by the materials cited, which are the same archival materials (e.g. letters, pamphlets, newspaper articles) from the Literary Museum in The Hague as Stutje, Rensen, and Wester worked with. Notwithstanding the mild sensationalism of parts of his account, Kruizinga's dissent must be viewed as adding further depth and fresh critique to the otherwise very lean and largely dormant debate on Jef Last.

The wider academic debate that this examination of Jef Last can be considered part of, concerns the Dutch men and women – numbering some 600 – that were involved in and/or with the Spanish Civil War. Given the small number of individuals that travelled to Spain from the Netherlands, as compared to Belgium (1 700<sup>4</sup>), I have decided to use 'Dutch' as a slightly broader term that also encompasses Flemish volunteers, and hence also includes some of the Belgian/Dutch-language scholarship on them. The academic and literary debate on the Dutch volunteers remains rather small, even including the Flemish contributions, and is spread out over a long and academically volatile period. The first publications that can be considered integral to the debate surfaced in 1982 and 1984 and were primarily concerned with documenting eyewitness experiences of several individuals that found themselves in Spain during the early stages of the

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<sup>4</sup> As stated by Beevor having joined the International Brigades; no clear number is given for the amount of individuals that were in Spain or entered it of their own account like Last did, though it seems unlikely to be a number of great significance. Antony Beevor. *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Orion Publishing, 2007).



Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936.<sup>5</sup> These social-historical and biographical accounts by 1986 had cultivated linkages with nascent scholarship on the contribution of foreign volunteers to the Republican war effort.<sup>6</sup> It is the scholarship that originated between 1982 and 1991 that Stutje and Wester primarily use as their foundation for their inquiries into Jef Last, and that they contribute to most with their publications.

It is notable that peer-reviewed scholarship on the matter took off in 1986; not only was that year the demi-centennial of the start of the Spanish Civil War, it also marked the entry of the newly democratised, post-Francoist Kingdom of Spain into the European Economic Community, which furthered academic interactions. This confluence of chronographic signification and multilateral political exchange produced the foundation of a growing academic interest in the Spanish Civil War and its international context, in the Netherlands as well as in Spain. The collapse of the many communist regimes in Central-Eastern Europe during 1989-91 put a sudden stop to much of the academic inquiry into communist fellow travellers, which Spanish Civil War volunteers were considered a part of, due to these men and women suddenly coming to exist on the 'wrong side' of history.

The initial foundation of the debate proved to be solid, but not necessarily unbiased. From 1992 through to 2006 the independent historical analysis of the Spanish Civil War from military, political-cultural, and socio-economic angles by both Spanish and international scholars provided the necessary scientific network to contextualise the often narrative personal histories that had been produced about it up until then.<sup>7</sup> The wave of publications from the 1980s and 1990s from roughly 2010 onward became subject to criticism from historians. The scholarship from the 2010s onward, by combining independent macro-histories with first-hand and journalistic from the 1980s and 1990s, represents the most modern incarnation of the academic debate on Dutch volunteers in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>8</sup> Currently, the debate is mainly geared towards investigating what these volunteers brought home from Spain ideologically, culturally, and socially in order to

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<sup>5</sup> In order of appearance: Martin Schouten. *Voor de oorlog: herinneringen aan de jaren '30* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982); and Margreet Braams, Maarten-Piet van den Berg, & Eelco Beukers. "*Wat Dunkt u van Spanje?*" – *Nederlanders en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog, 1936-1939* (Amsterdam: Skript, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Hans Dankaart, *De Oorlog begon in Spanje: Nederlanders in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog 1936-39* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1986); Hub Hermans, *Littekens in een gelooide stierhuid - Nederlandstalige schrijvers over de Spaanse Burgeroorlog 1936-1939 : een bloemlezing* (Amsterdam: Agathon, 1986); and Gerard Lutke Meijer, *Voorspel Wereldbrand. Een ooggetuigenverslag van de Spaanse Burgeroorlog* (Den Haag: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Pim Griffioen, Erik Hibold, Isabella Lanz, Rik Vuurmans, Ineke Deurwaa.; Isabella Lanz; *En gij... wat deed gij voor Spanje? Nederlanders en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog 1936-1939* (Amsterdam: Stichting Verzetsmuseum 1992); Hub Hermans, Adri Boon, Olga Cid. *Een Nederlandse blik op de Spaanse Burgeroorlog / Una mirada holandesa sobre la Guerra Civil Española* (Utrecht: Instituto Cervantes, 2006); and Koen Vossen, 'Nederland en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog', in *Een Nederlandse blik op de Spaanse Burgeroorlog / Una mirada holandesa sobre la Guerra Civil Española*, ed. Hub. Hermans et al. (Utrecht: Instituto Cervantes, 2006)

<sup>8</sup> Albert Helman & Michiel van Kempen (ed.) *De sfinx van Spanje : beschouwingen van een ooggetuige* (De Bilt: Schokland Uitgeverij, 2011); Yvonne Scholten, *Fanny Schoonhey; Een Nederlands meisje strijdt in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2011).

further the understanding of the impact that their foreign adventures had on their countries of origin.<sup>9</sup> It is this debate that Rensen and Kruizinga still actively participate and publish in.<sup>10</sup>

Having outlined and explored these debates and their contents, it is necessary to elucidate how this MA-thesis aims to contribute to them. With regard to the narrow debate on Jef Last this MA-thesis will challenge existing views on Last's political radicalisation and his decision-making process before traveling to Spain. More specifically, it will challenge the current claims by Wester, Kruizinga, and Stutje that Last joined a Stalinist-aligned militia in September 1936, and furthermore critique their assertions that his political views remained primarily communist throughout the 1934-39 period. Instead, I will argue on the basis of compelling evidence that Last's political views and motives as early as August 1934 had decisively turned away from Stalinist interpretations of communism and increasingly leaned towards Trotskyist, democratic socialist, and even anarcho-syndicalist interpretations thereof. I will moreover contend that this breaking with Stalinism was a long, multi-layered process of political identification that was affected by a wide variety of events and incidents, none of which should be considered leading in the way the other authors have done up until now. My contribution to the narrow debate is hence the nuancing and sharpening of largely correct and plausible understandings of Last's motives as presented by Stutje, Kruizinga, and Wester.

With regard to the broader debate on Dutch and Dutch-speaking volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, this thesis aims to add to existing scholarship by providing a potentially universalizable account of the processes of radicalisation, repatriation, and isolation that a large portion of foreign fighters in the conflict experienced to varying degrees. Last, although he possesses a unique character and ditto flaws, displayed an innate ability to continuously grapple with his own political position and a strong resistance to the political discipline that totalitarian systems tended to impose on those it considered its subjects. The fact that he committed much of this to paper both before, during, and after his participation in the Spanish Civil War is even more unique, and provides a richly detailed overview of his thought processes and consequent actions. The fact that much of it is self-documented and corroborated by other primary source material makes Last's story more reliable than many other accounts. Especially with regard to the scholarship on Spanish Civil War volunteers in the 1980s (primarily made up out of snapshots and memory-based interviews), Last's story has a significantly more longitudinal character, which allows for the more reliable analysis of historical patterns in his political thinking and his actions when compared to the snapshots and interviews done by Dankkaart and Griffioen et al.

Building on this notion, Last's story technically fits in the category of scholarship that Scholten and Helman & Kempen belong to. It connects to the scholarship by Hermans et al. as the analysis of Last's experiences in a secondary sense lays bare a transnational network of intellectuals during the 1930s that originated in Amsterdam and Antwerp respectively, and survived into the Second World War, albeit after significant recasting of political roles of leftists military veterans. My contribution to the broader debate on Dutch volunteers in the Spanish Civil War is hence twofold. Firstly and foremostly my contribution aims to further the notion that there exists a vaguely uniform notion of antifascism that motivated these volunteers in their taking

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<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Adriaensen. *La guerra civil española en las revistas literarias y culturales belgas y holandesas 1936-1939* (Kortrijk : Leuven University Press, 2010) ; and Svent Tuytens & Rudi van Doorslaer, *Piet 'Israël' Akkerman, van Antwerpse vakbondsleider tot Spanjestrijder* (Antwerpen/ Waasland: ABVV Algemene centrale, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Samuël Kruizinga. "Struggling to fit in. The Dutch in a Transnational Army 1936-1939" in *Journal of Modern European History*, May 2018, no. 2, vol.16, pp.183-202

action, and unified them in resolve to contribute to a common cause. Secondly, this contribution aims to further the notion that the volunteerism in the Spanish Civil War is much more of a transnational affair – especially in terms of intellectual networks – than current national approaches to the historical scholarship thereof seem to let on. By examining the richly detailed corpus of primary sources Last has left regarding his time in the Spanish Civil War, this MA-thesis contributes a template that might help recast established understandings of the processes of radicalisation, repatriation, and isolation that Dutch volunteers underwent in the 1930s.

Jef Last has left an extensive body of primary source material in the form of his own publications and the correspondence between himself, his wife Ida Last-Ter Haar, and André Gide, which was later also published by themselves or third parties.<sup>11</sup> Another valuable primary source is the denunciatory pamphlet against Last published by CPN-adept Nico Rost of 1938. These sources span the late 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, and are of varying reliability. Less valuable but still important are Last's publications of the 1960s, which contain autobiographical elements and recollections. These tend to be far more unreliable than the correspondence, and cause confusion more often than they help clarify any past endeavours; these will also be covered further ahead. This unreliability stems primarily from faulty, hazy, or otherwise inaccurate recollections of memories through his own reading of his contemporary letters, and in a secondary sense from Last's attempts to embellish his past actions whilst trying to remain on the 'good side' of history.<sup>12</sup>

Jef Last and his wife Ida Last-Ter Haar<sup>13</sup> corresponded extensively throughout the Interbellum and built an interpersonal rapport which – based on their letters – was out of step with the traditions of their time. Their overall correspondence over the course of the entire Interbellum is hard to pin down precisely in numbers, but if we are to take their 2-3 letters and telegrams per week for a total of some 30-32 letters during Jef's time in Spain as a middling estimate, it is likely to run into the hundreds of individual source items. Jef and Ida were both independent-minded individuals and given the fact that Jef was both bisexually inclined and often travelling away from his family for long periods of time, their communication style is generally matter of fact, often intending to assuage worry. Few if any textual hallmarks of romantic love are present throughout their correspondence, though there is a definite and enduring sense of mutual care and regard underlying their communications. Before Jef travelled to fight in Spain, their correspondence is primarily concerned with political ideation and discussion, in which their mutual interest and fascination for the emancipation of the working classes dominated the agenda.

During Jef's time in Spain, the content of the letters changes to an almost journalistic narrative of both their lives, and expressions of worry about money and concern for Jef's survival in the war intersperse their discussion of political incidents of interest. Ida Last-Ter Haar published Jef's letters from Spain – unedited and in full – for their commission in several leftist magazines, in order to have a source of income, between late 1936 (December) and 1937 (February through

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<sup>11</sup> Ida Ter Haar-Last published much of his Spanish letters in communist magazines and other periodicals without his knowledge. When Last returned from Spain in 1938, he published an edited version thereof through leftist Amsterdam-based publishers. The correspondence between Last and Gide was stored in bundled fashion by the latter's secretary, and after her death passed to scholars at the University of Lyon who proceeded to edit and publish it in the mid-1980s. Jef Last's side of the correspondence had after his death passed to his daughters, who in turn gave elements of it to the Literary Museum in The Hague.

<sup>12</sup> Jef Last, *Mijn Vriend André Gide* (Amsterdam: Van Ditmar, 1966), Foreword.

<sup>13</sup> Willemien Schenkeveld. Haar, Ida ter, in: *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland* (2017), Huygens-KNAW Resources.

June).<sup>14</sup> She did so in several periodicals, but most notably in the leftist women's magazine *De Proletarische Vrouw* initially, from whence the letters eventually found their way to a much broader selection of publications.<sup>15</sup> The reception of the bundled letters was positive – if not exuberant – in many of these magazines, and shows that the propagandistic undercurrent of Last's personal writing really struck a chord with Dutch audiences across the board, and leftists of varying political signatures in particular. The fact that after his departure from the CPN he managed to reprint the letters in the *De Spaanse Tragedie* in late 1938 (September-October) and it appealed to largely the same audience is even more worthwhile, as it shows that the core theme of his writing as well as his letters – in this case antifascism – remained relevant or even increased in relevance to a broad audience. Vice versa it also strongly shows that antifascism remained Last's primary core political belief, even after the political denunciations and his isolation from the CPN.<sup>16</sup>

Though Jef Last claims throughout the 1930s as well as in his 1960s autobiographical material that his wife published their Spanish correspondence without his knowledge, there is some reason to doubt this and potentially view his letters from Spain as a rather convoluted propaganda-plot. In the case the original story holds true, the letters from Spain are a remarkable piece of ego-documentation and a largely unadulterated Dutch-language trove of everyday political life. If the letters are a propaganda ploy, the question rises whose idea it was, and on the orders of whom they were produced and published. I am convinced enough of the authenticity of the original story by several erratic details which will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The other body of correspondence that was extensively examined in this thesis is that between André Gide and Jef Last. The two writers had met in Paris in and had developed a strong friendship as a result of their personal backgrounds, their writership, as well as their contentious participation in leftist circles. Gide was almost 30 years Last's senior, held a revered position in French literature, and had been appropriated by the French left as an intellectual ally. He was moreover homosexual and married, in the same way that Last was bisexual and married, which produced a kindred-spirit dynamic at the foundations of their friendship. The correspondence between Gide and Last was commenced by the latter, and was conducted entirely in French. From their meeting in 1934 to the last days of Gide's life in 1950 the two men would correspond frequently and cover a wide range of relevant topics. In the four years between Last's meeting Gide and the outbreak of the Second World War, they wrote one another no less than 80 letters

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<sup>14</sup> "De Vergissing: Het gaat „om de gezuiverde wederopstanding van het waarachtige katholicisme in de harten" in *De Proletarische Vrouw – Weekblad van de Bond van Soc. Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit*, no. 1110, vol. 31, 16 December 1936, p. 1; "Ontvangen: In de loopgraven van Madrid, 2e serie brieven." in *De Proletarische Vrouw – Weekblad van de Bond van Soc. Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit*, no.1119, vol. 31, 17 February 1937, p. 12; and "Over Spanje: Zij zullen er niet doorkomen!" in *De Proletarische Vrouw – Weekblad van de Bond van Soc. Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit*, no. 1136, vol 32, 16 June 1937, p. 7

<sup>15</sup> "De Vergissing: Het gaat „om de gezuiverde wederopstanding van het waarachtige katholicisme in de harten" in *De Proletarische Vrouw – Weekblad van de Bond van Soc. Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit*, no. 1110, vol. 31, 16 December 1936, p. 1; "Ontvangen: In de loopgraven van Madrid, 2e serie brieven." in *De Proletarische Vrouw – Weekblad van de Bond van Soc. Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit*, no.1119, vol. 31, 17 February 1937, p. 12; and "Over Spanje: Zij zullen er niet doorkomen!" in *De Proletarische Vrouw – Weekblad van de Bond van Soc. Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit*, no. 1136, vol 32, 16 June 1937, p. 7

<sup>16</sup> J. Brouwer, "Intellect en intellectversjachering. Enkele opmerkingen naar aanleiding van litteratuur over Spanje." In *De Stem* 18 (1938) pp. 215-217

and telegrams of which the majority – circa fifty items – was sent from Last to Gide, with the remainder being answers to these.

The rapport that emerges from their letters is initially that of a master-literatus and a novice writer; Gide exerted significant influence over Last's writing style, inducing him to abandon the excessively stripped form of prose he had utilised up until then. Gide largely maintains this understanding of their rapport, and eventually becomes a Maecenas to Last, who continually struggles to secure any form of survivable income. Last conversely starts seeing Gide as something of an emotional equal as early as their correspondence of late 1934, which Gide neither notices nor follows.<sup>17</sup> This discrepancy in how they view their personal relationship leads to misunderstandings, and especially for Last produces some disappointments in between their mutual visitation of the Soviet Union and his return from the war in Spain.<sup>18</sup> Compared to his rapport with his wife, Last is surprisingly much more open about his emotions to Gide than to her. Especially his negative emotional experiences – those of fear, disappointment, and isolation – he shares extensively with Gide, often in order to provoke Gide into taking action of some sort on his behalf, or to simply to vent.

Thematically the correspondence between Last and Gide is rich and multifaceted. Since they both came from strict Protestant backgrounds, austerity in writing and living is a recurrent theme in their interactions, with Gide often arguing against it (essentially playing the role of 'corruptor') whereas Last favours it as he sees it as a means to come closer to the working man. The theme that is discussed most in their overall correspondence is the role of Stalin's Soviet Union in shaping the nature of communism and its role in international affairs. Neither Last nor Gide are sympathetic to the Bolshevization of the communist discourse, and both men are anguished by the growing social puritanism and anti-progressive dogmatism within the wider European left that emerges during the first few years of their correspondence. A third theme that crops up in the correspondence towards the later 1930s is the purely strategic role of the Soviet Union in staving off the tide of fascism that had swept Europe by that time; Last was adamant that Moscow – however unsympathetic it may have been to their personal cases – was the final and only hope in the fight against fascism, and must be sought to cooperate with. Gide conversely was deeply convinced of the corruptness of the Soviet idea of communism and made every effort – especially after his journey there of July-August 1936 – to antagonise Moscow and create cultural space for a more progressive Western European form of leftism, that was not necessarily communist in nature.

Broadly speaking, the correspondence between Last and Gide is remarkable for its frankness and directness. The edited volume of Greshoff contains most of this correspondence in a non-chronological order, leaving out only the ill-readable letters and telegrams of which the subject matter is discussed in subsequent letters. Few matters are left undiscussed or unspoken, and many strong emotions are featured throughout it, much more so than in the correspondence between Jef and Ida. Before Last goes to Spain, they extensively discuss the nature, place, and role of homosexuality in literature, and trade occasionally harsh criticisms of each other's works during this discussion. In a similar vein they engage in debates on communism and political practices, which as early as July 1936 cause significant discord between them. Their inability to reconcile

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<sup>17</sup> Rudi Wester. "Een spel der misverstanden – de vriendschap tussen en André Gide en Jef Last" in *De Parelduiker* 10 (2005): pp. 71-85

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

their experiences of the Soviet journey of the summer of 1936 remains an important point of discussion for their correspondence until at least 1939 and is – with the exception of most of 1937 – conducted in the same open and unambiguous style as their previous discussions. Only when Last became aware that his communications were monitored, and his political situation in Spain demanded self-saving measures he interrupts this style. There are letters that suggest Gide was not keen on playing along with this, and it seems that Gide was not content to accept Last's rather changeable attitudes during much of 1936-37 over his stance on communism. The general dependability of the correspondence between Last and Gide thus stems primarily from the latter's stylistic and thematic consistency and provides a stark contrast to the chaotic shifts and capers of the former's themes and style, even if they were for the sake self-preservation.

The final components of the primary source corpus are Jef Last's published literary works, as well as his autobiographic writings. Throughout his literary career Last produced emancipatory novels and stories, as well as vast quantities of propagandistic accounts of a wide variety of themes. In his novels from 1934 he poured a good deal of personal feeling and outlooks on the world in general. Between 1934 and 1936 there is a definite sense of anticipation if not anguish for the future, interspersed with a latent hopefulness that things turn out better than they might look. By the time he returns from Spain this has made way for a pessimism that permeates his prose, story-organisation, and perhaps even choice of words. By 1939 Last arguably starts to outwardly feel and act misunderstood from a literary perspective, which does him no favours in the literary arena and effectively relegates him to obscurity, which he offsets by engaging in journalism rather than fiction-writing after the Second World War. Last's propaganda-writing follows a similar pattern, peaking in its ferocity and urgency during early 1937 after a steady build-up started during the early 1930s, slumping following his dejection at the goings-on in Spain. Of note is the thematic switch he makes shortly before the peak of his efforts in September 1937; where he beforehand primarily advocated internationalism, he quite suddenly starts exclusively writing about Dutch volunteers, Dutch political affairs, and the relationship of Dutch communism with the rest of the world, as opposed to the inverse thereof which permeated his earlier propaganda-writing. These efforts cease after the Second World War.

By the last decade of his life, in the early- to mid-1960s Last wrote several limited autobiographic accounts, which include a detailed description of his friendship with André Gide and an edited account of his time in Spain. These accounts were largely based of recollections and were supplemented by notes from personal meetings with individuals he was involved with at the time. This included conversations with some of his Spanish militiamen and friends that had known Gide and himself during the 1930s. Although he kept a fairly dependable record of his activities during the 1930s, his biographies seem to have forfeited quite a few facts that were in those records, and Last frequently changes, switches, or backdates incidents and events he described in his autobiographical writing. The overall result is that much of his autobiographical work is difficult to depend on for true historical facts, and that coupled with the unreliability of historical memory in general it is impossible to draw on these works for precise corroboration of certain facts. They nevertheless do represent a significant portion of the foundation on which his scholarship from the 1980s to present has conducted its inquiries and built its narrative, making it a valuable skeleton key to their understanding of his actions, experiences, and works.

Having clarified the academic debates and primary sources that this thesis on Jef Last operates within and draws on, it is necessary to discuss the methodology that it will utilise in the analysis. Given the fact that all scholars that have published on Last argue that he broke with

communism in 1938 by renouncing his membership to the CPN, this will be the critical element of the debate to counterargue or corroborate. In order to do so I will make use of a mixed methodical approach to gain a complete understanding of his actions, motivations, and disposition between 1931 and 1938.

The first and foremost method employed is that of critical analysis of primary source material. There is significant reason to more critically analyse Last's correspondence with Ida Ter Haar-Last and André Gide, and challenge existing scholarship in its assumption of facts from these documents. There is also reason to significantly devalue Last's 1960s publications in terms of truthfulness, which puts several uncritical assumptions of current scholarship under further pressure. The second method employed is that of a detailed analysis of Last's writing and actions in the political and cultural context of the 1930s, to establish how Last's intellectual development informed his political actions, and how the backlash against these actions came to underpin themes in his writing after the fact.

Together, these methods produce an account of Last and his relationship with communism that consists of four layered tensions. The first and most obvious tension between Last and communism is strategic in nature; with the Soviet Union proving instrumental in guiding the Comintern and the course of leftist internationalism during the 1930s, Last had great hopes for Soviet intervention to stave off the rising tide of fascism. Throughout the 1930s he alternated between disappointment and elation with regards to these efforts. The second layer is deeply personal; Last was strongly aware of his bisexual nature, but remained closeted about it until at least October 1934 (i.e. before meeting Gide). The left in general was sharply divided over homosexuality in general, but by 1934 the communists had taken a distinctly homophobic stance on the issue, which severely negatively affected Last. The third layer is artistic and literary in nature. Last held a lifelong hate for the bourgeois narrowmindedness he grew up in, and particularly enjoyed making use of literary licence to go against this. Although he initially dabbled in the socialist realist literary style, he came to fear it, as its principles in his eyes meant the introduction of a bourgeois-like artistic narrowmindedness into the realm of communist culture. The fourth and final layer concerns Last's inability to reconcile some of his utopic views of communist society with the reality on the ground; the increasingly totalitarian atmosphere in the Soviet Union drove him to look for his ideal socialist society in the Second Republic. The strategic and utopic tensions manifested themselves expressly after 1934, whereas the artistic and personal tensions must be considered lifelong themes.

This MA thesis is divided into three analytical chapters. Chapter 1 covers Jef Last's early life, before diving deeper into his experiences and activities during 1934 and 1935. This chapter details Last's initial relationship with socialist thought, his radicalisation to revolutionary communist, and the inner conflicts that led to his dissent against specific aspects of the hard line set out by Stalin in international European communism. It also examines Last's intellectual and writerly development as a result of his intense personal friendship with celebrated French author André Gide. Chapter 2 concerns Last's final journey to the Soviet Union together with Gide, his decision to travel to Spain and fight in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and the political machinations that eventually forced him to leave Spain in 1937 and reconsider his political position on international communism. Chapter 3 details Last's semi-self-chosen exile in Scandinavia from early 1938 to the late 1939. It examines his means of dealing with the ostracization from the CPH/CPN and his attempts at finding another shore to travel to, in order to pursue his utopianised visions of a humane, humanitarian socialism after the Soviet Union and Spain failed to live up to those ideals.

## **Chapter 1 – Jef Last, Friend of the Soviet Union | 1934-35**

### **Jef Last before 1934 – From boy scout to leftist radical**

Born Josephus Carel Franciscus Last on the 2nd of May 1898 in The Hague, Jef grew up in a bourgeois family with a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, both with *Indische* roots. Jef was consequently raised in the Protestant tradition. Before returning to the Netherlands, father Last was a navy officer with the fleet in the Netherlands East Indies. His father's new occupation – labour inspector – made the family move throughout the Netherlands often, causing young Jef to make few robust friendships, and turning him inwardly to the family for social engagement.<sup>19</sup> Successively living in The Hague, Rotterdam, Deventer, Leeuwarden, Venlo, and Amsterdam Last entered the Dutch chapter of the Scouts movement at the age of twelve.<sup>20</sup> It was through the Scouts movement that he first came in touch with the social- and economic ills of the industrialising economies in Western Europe. During a journey to Manchester in the early summer of 1914 teenage Jef Last was shocked by the appalling living- and working conditions of the working class there, which kindled what would be a lifelong interest in the conditions of the working classes at home and abroad.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after the start of the First World War, in which the Netherlands remained neutral, Last endeavoured to turn his newfound concern and interest for the workers into action. By this time he had read works by French socialist theorists such as Lafargue<sup>22</sup>, Proudhon, and Blanqui, as well as anti-colonial literature like *Multatuli* which had landed him a querulous relationship with his peers at the various Hogere Burgerschool ('Higher Civic School'; HBS) institutions he was a student at.<sup>23</sup> In 1916, at the age of eighteen he was suspended and subsequently removed from a HBS in Amsterdam, his rebelliousness having been cited as the primary justification for this punishment. Through contacts of his fathers' he eventually did obtain a HBS-diploma but held off on pursuing a higher education. Instead, Last opted to work in several trades in order to see and feel how the working class in the Netherlands lived and struggled. These were acts primarily of curiosity, but also of reaction against his own bourgeois background. In 1917 he worked in the coal mines in Limburg and on a farm in rural Brabant.<sup>24</sup> As a result of his experiences there he decided to become a member of the Sociaaldemocratische Arbeiderspartij ('Social Democratic Workers' Party; SDAP) that same year.<sup>25</sup>

In 1918 Last entered Leiden University to study Chinese Literature with the ambition of becoming a colonial official in the Netherlands East Indies after graduation. Somewhat contrary to his newfound kinship with the working class, he joined the Leidsch Studenten Corps ('the Student Association of Leiden', at that time a collection of all-male fraternity-associations; LSC).<sup>26</sup> Throughout 1918 he was simultaneously active as a member of the LSC as well as for the Arbeiders Jeugd Centrale ('Workers' Youth Central, the youth organisation of the SDAP; AJC), seeming to

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<sup>19</sup> Rudi Wester. "De autobiografieën van Jef Last" in *Maatstaf* 36 (1988): pp. 164-170

<sup>20</sup> Wester, "De autobiografieën van Jef Last", pp. 164-170

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Who besides prolific socialist author was also the son-in-law of Karl Marx.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Robèrt Gillese. "De Tijd der Idealisten – Jef Last in de Jaren Dertig". (Doctoral Dissertation, Leiden University, 1994), pp. 11-25

<sup>25</sup> Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 11-25

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



favour neither initially.<sup>27</sup> In 1919 he had made some headway into becoming fluent in Chinese, but increasingly abandoned his academic duties in favour of trips to the nearby fishing town of Katwijk, an ostensibly odd choice because of his leftist and revolutionary sympathies. Given his strict Protestant upbringing however it may have been a quite logical choice for him, as he – at his relatively young age – would still likely have held some of the idiosyncratic Protestant views and mannerisms that could have made him accepted in their community.

Already in 1918, he had dressed up as a fisherman and sought contact with workers there, and by 1919 had decided to work on a trawler that operated from there for a few months. Returning to shore more permanently in July 1919, he fulfilled his military service with the Royal Netherlands Navy as a so-termed ‘zeemilicïen’ or naval militiaman.<sup>28</sup> The navy militia was a small, land-based component of the Royal Netherlands Navy that was tasked with the operating of coastal artillery, as well as the guarding of relevant military installations, and during the Interbellum called up only about 800 men per year.<sup>29</sup> Last joined shortly after the navy militia had developed a reputation for containing significant revolutionary elements, which is of some interest. Although conscription was technically personal, universal, and binding, there might be more to Last’s ending up in the navy militia, and it might be worth investigating in the future whether he had any connections to the soldiers’ councils of 1918, even though current scholarship and evidence suggests no such thing.<sup>30</sup>

Last was discharged from his first period as a conscript in July 1920 and decided to continue working at sea. From the summer of 1920 to April of 1921 he worked as a sailor aboard various merchant marine ships, before returning home to fulfil the second six-month period of his conscript duties until late 1921. By March of 1922 he had found employment initially as a foreman and later as a manager in the ENKA (lit. Nederlandse Kunstzijdefabriek or ‘Dutch Artificial Silk Factory’; a phoneticized version of its abbreviation ‘NK’) factory in Ede. Though still an SDAP-member, Last was comparatively less invested in the socialist movement than during his time in Leiden. Where he was involved, he tended to favour the more artistic side of the emancipatory ambitions of the movement. In 1923 he married Ida ter Haar, who he had met already in 1918 in Rotterdam. Ter Haar came from a similarly stifling bourgeois milieu as Last, and the pair had connected over their shared desire to escape this and help emancipate the working class through the arts. Ter Haar was a pioneer of children’s educative theatre, whereas Last was a fledgling poet and journalist. From the get-go Last and Ter Haar by their own accounts understood their mutual desire to plan their own lives, go their own way, and draw on their own resourcefulness to stay (financially) afloat; especially the latter proved to be recurring theme throughout the 1930s.<sup>31</sup> Ter

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<sup>27</sup> Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, pp. 11-25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Schoemaker. *Burgerzin en Soldatengeest; de relatie tussen volk, leger, en vloot 1832-1914* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom/Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie, 2009), pp. 373-390

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. I suspect that Last’s *Indische* heritage may have something to do with his ending up as navy militiaman, as well as the fact that his father had been a navy officer. Conversely it seems unlikely that his father as a conservative and anti-revolutionary would have supported his son in joining an organisation known for its revolutionary members. Vice versa it might be the case that his father pulled some strings to land his son in the navy for reasons of personal kinship and passing on a family tradition. Since it is unclear how his relationship with his father was, it must be considered chance at best for now. See also Ron Blom (2014) “Neutral Netherlands: A Small Imperialist Power in the Epoch of War and Revolution. Left-wing Soldiers' and Sailors' Organisations, 1914–1919” in *Critique* vol. 42 no 3 (2014), pp. 377-394

<sup>31</sup> Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, pp. 11-25. See also Willemien Schenkeveld. Haar, Ida ter, in: *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland* (2017), Huygens-KNAW Resources.

Haar and Last would have three daughters, which were born in 1923, 1925, and 1927. Last became increasingly unhappy about his job at the factory from late 1923 onward.<sup>32</sup>

In February 1924 Last resigned from his function at the ENKA and left for the United States. He had hoped to enter Columbia University and finish his degree in Chinese Literature there but ended up working menial jobs for nine months which could only support himself, thus leaving Ida and his daughter to fend for themselves.<sup>33</sup> Upon his return in November 1924 Last and Ter Haar briefly worked at a home for difficult children, but were both fired after having been found to be ‘too progressive’ in their curricular programming.<sup>34</sup> In August 1925 Last found employment with the film department of the SDAP, and travelled around the Netherlands for it until 1928.<sup>35</sup> Concurrently with his employment as SDAP-filmmaker he had intensified his literary productivity, making his formal debut in 1926 with the poetry bundle *Bakboordlichten* (‘Port[side] Lights’).<sup>36</sup> By 1927 Last had developed increasingly radical viewpoints regarding colonialism and the necessity for revolution, which led him to join the League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression (LAI), an international organisation, which at the time was in breach of SDAP membership statutes.<sup>37</sup> At the LAI congress of 1927 in Brussels Last made the acquaintance of among others Edo Fimmen, Henk Sneevliet and Mohammad Hatta, with whom he would later cross paths again.<sup>38</sup>

The professional and political differences that had grown between Last and the SDAP culminated in his firing from the film department in 1928.<sup>39</sup> In April that year Last formally renounced his membership of the LAI in order to be able to remain an SDAP-member and until the spring of 1929 held a wide variety of jobs, including a stint as substitute teacher at various schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam.<sup>40</sup> In December of 1929 he started publishing in the periodical of Henk Sneevliet’s Revolutionair-Socialistische Partij (‘Revolutionary Socialist Party; RSP) and built a rapport with Sneevliet and his close associates. In January of 1930 he consequently renounced his membership of the SDAP before becoming a member of both the RSP and the Nationaal Arbeiders-Secretariaat (‘National Labour Secretariat’, a trade union federation; NAS) together with his wife Ida in February of that year. In order to channel his artistic activities and connect with congenial leftist artists he founded the Bond Links Richten (‘Union Aim[ing] Left’) in November 1930. The Bond Links Richten attracted few artists but did develop something of a following, including a shadowy individual by the name of Richard André Manuel, a bank director who became a prominent of the Amsterdam chapter of the Bond.<sup>41</sup> He would later play a key role in the assassination of Soviet defector Ignace Reiss, and become an important link between the

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<sup>32</sup> Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, pp. 11-25. See also Willemien Schenkeveld. Haar, Ida ter, in: *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland* (2017), Huygens-KNAW Resources.

<sup>33</sup> Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, pp. 11-25

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., see also Fredrik Petersson, “We are Neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers: Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism and the Comintern, 1925-1933”. (Phd dissertation, Abo Akademi Turku, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Hyslop. “German seafarers, anti-fascism and the anti-Stalinist left: the ‘Antwerp Group’ and Edo Fimmen’s International Transport Workers’ Federation, 1933–40” in *Global Networks* no. 4, Vol. 19 (2019), pp. 499-520. See also Klaas Stutje. “To maintain an independent course. Interwar Indonesian nationalism and international communism on a Dutch-European stage” in *Dutch Crossing*, vol. 39 no. 2 (2015).

<sup>39</sup> Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, pp. 11-25

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Rensen. “El Capitán Jef Last”, pp. 173-184

Soviet GPU ('Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie' or State Political Directorate of the NKVD) and the Dutch communist movement, both of which were located on the Overtoom in Amsterdam.<sup>42</sup>

Last pushed heavily for a more active role in the RSP-NAS during much of 1930, quarrelling with Sneevliet, but eventually got his way and was accorded a position in the party leadership in April of 1931.<sup>43</sup> Shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1931, Last and Sneevliet got into a major conflict over the international position of the RSP; Sneevliet advocated joining Trotsky's Fourth International, whereas Last advocated a closer relationship with the Soviet Union so as to overcome the marginal position in Dutch politics that the RSP had held up until then. Sneevliet won over the rest of the leadership and Last was dismissed from his position as well as the party in November 1931 after he had visited the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup>

This first journey to the Soviet Union, organised through the Comintern, had made a profound impression on Last, and brought him into contact with German communist literati that worked for the Internationale Vereinigung revolutionärer Schriftsteller ('International Association of Revolutionary Writers'; IVRS), a Comintern subsidiary.<sup>45</sup> He decided to work for the IVRS, and returned to the Soviet Union in March of 1932 for a second journey, which again made a hugely progressive impression on him.<sup>46</sup> The way of life he experienced in the Soviet Union, among his IVRS comrades as well as seemingly healthy and decently-off locals inspired Last to experiment with literature that would later be dubbed socialist-realist. In his August 1932 publication *Het stalen fundament* (lit.: 'the steel foundation') he wrote extensively about the finalising of Stalin's First Five-Year-Plan, covering both him and the Soviet people in superlatives.<sup>47</sup> Last's fascination with the core tenets of modernism become apparent from these passages on the Kulaks and the growing mobilization of the Soviet economy: "de Sowjet-Unie is een land in oorlogstoestand, de strijd voor het socialisme is tegelijk de strijd tot vernietiging der koelaken als klasse ... In den strijd van het nieuwe tegen het oude worden de waardevolle elementen behouden".<sup>48</sup> When compared to his later writing, *Het stalen fundament* is a strange treasure trove of stylistic methods and literary motives he continued using throughout his writerly and political career. The strangeness, however, resides in the uncommon unison in which art and politics operate in this work on an equal footing; after *Het stalen fundament* Last would favour either propagandistic or literary writing to be the main themes of his work.<sup>49</sup>

April through June of 1932 Last spent reorganising Links Richten into a periodical as opposed to a collective, before travelling to the Soviet Union once again in July and August for a third journey. This third journey tested Last's faith in the Soviet experiment after he had witnessed the denunciation and humiliation of one of his German IVRS colleagues following a supposedly

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<sup>42</sup> Igor Cornelissen. *De GPOe op de Overtoom. Spionnen voor Moskou 1920-1940* (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1989), pp. 39-71

<sup>43</sup> Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 27-39

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 173-174

<sup>46</sup> Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 27-39

<sup>47</sup> Jef Last, *Het stalen fundament - Reportage over 2500 km zwerftochten door de Oeral* (Amsterdam: Kontakt, 1933).

<sup>48</sup> Lit. "The Soviet Union is a country in a state of war, the struggle for socialism is concurrently the struggle to destroy the Kulaks as a class [in society] ... In the battle of the new against the old, the valuable elements are retained". Last, *Het stalen fundament*, pp. 177-178

<sup>49</sup> Wester, "De autobiografieën van Jef Last", pp. 164-170

‘reactionary’ publication regarding the political situation in Germany.<sup>50</sup> Rather than practicing self-censorship, Last went the opposite direction; in support of his colleague he affirmed the notions that a fascist coup by Hitler’s NSDAP could become a reality before or during the 1933 elections, and that the Comintern must be vigilant about it.<sup>51</sup> He was promptly made to take this eerily prophetic assertion back, and was told to abandon this ‘defeatist’ stance on Germany.<sup>52</sup> This did not deter Last in his steadfast belief that the realisation of communism and the role of the Soviet Union therein was imperative; in October of 1932 he discussed the possibility of relocating there with his wife, who – according to Stutje’s analysis of their correspondence – started making preparations in earnest.<sup>53</sup>

From January through March 1933 Last observed the developments in Germany with growing despair; Hitler’s seizure of power after the Reichstag Fire in February aggravated Last to join the CPH and to start working for the International Red Help besides his already participating in the Vrienden van de Sovjet-Unie (‘Friends of the Soviet Union’; VVSU) organisation.<sup>54</sup> Last had been passively opposed to fascism since his RSAP-days, but with the Hitler-coup became actively opposed to it, seeking to make this opposition material from then on.<sup>55</sup> From March through October 1933 he, in parallel with his efforts for the CPH, also spent much time debating and writing for Links Richten, visiting several writer’s congresses from Utrecht to Paris to develop his precise position on the matter of Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe and his purported hand in the Reichstag Fire.<sup>56</sup> Shortly after the incident and Van der Lubbe’s trial Willi Münzenberg, the head of the LAI and one of the chief propagandists of the now-outlawed KPD, published the so-called Braunbuch (‘Brown Book’, ‘Bruinboek’ in Dutch). The Bruinboek was a problematic synthesis of fact, speculation, and propaganda which disavowed Van der Lubbe as a true communist, and portrayed him as blindly careless idealist at best, and a Nazi provocateur at worst.<sup>57</sup> The pamphlet moreover devoted extensive attention to Van der Lubbe’s homosexuality, from which ties with Ernst Röhm’s SA were speculatively derived.<sup>58</sup> It is unclear from literature and sources how exactly this affected Last, but given his later reaction and self-censorship, it seems he was more interested in the strategic implications than the personal matters underlying it.

The Bruinboek caused uproar in communist movements across Europe, and in the Netherlands provoked a publication titled ‘Roodboek’ (‘Red Book’) in reaction; this counter-pamphlet stood by Van der Lubbe and attempted to refute its contents through testimonies and sarcasm.<sup>59</sup> The Dutch left remained divided on Roodboek, but a clear split between Stalinists and Trotskyites on the publication developed rapidly, with the former rejecting it and the latter

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<sup>50</sup> Jan Willem Stutje. “Tussen Hoop en Angst: De Communistische Jaren van Jef Last” in *Maatstaf* 42, no. 10 (1994), pp. 58-71.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. See also Willemien Schenkeveld. Haar, Ida ter, in: *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland* (2017), Huygens-KNAW Resources

<sup>55</sup> Stutje. “Tussen Hoop en Angst”, pp. 58-71

<sup>56</sup> Nico Jassies. “Marinus van der Lubbe en de Rijksdagbrand” in *Jaarboek der sociale en economische geschiedenis van Leiden en omstreken 1999* (Leiden: Dirk van Eck Stichting, 2000), p. 3. It is of some note that Jassies mentions Jef Last’s *Doodstraf voor een provo*, a polemic that Last wrote towards the end of his life.

<sup>57</sup> Jassies, “Marinus van der Lubbe en de Rijksdagbrand”, pp. 29-31

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-36

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. see also Maurits Dekker e.a. *Roodboek. Van der Lubbe en de Rijksdagbrand* (Amsterdam: Internationaal Uitgeversbedrijf, 1933).

subscribing to its contents.<sup>60</sup> In Last's *Links Richten* the discussion also raged; the Amsterdam-based contributors – potentially invigorated by Manuel – rejected the *Roodboek*, underwriting the *Bruinboek* by a significant majority.<sup>61</sup> Last himself hence also rejected the *Roodboek*, though it must be questioned if he did so in good faith and overtly given his own closeted sexual orientation.<sup>62</sup> From December 1933 through March 1934 he worked tirelessly to smuggle many German refugees through the Benelux to France where many different communities of exiles had carved out place for themselves.<sup>63</sup>

### **April 1934 - December 1935 – Meeting André Gide**

During the early months of 1934 France, like Germany the year before, experienced large-scale political violence and upheaval. The combination of the collapse of the Chautemps government in late 1933 as a result of a corruption affair, the deepening of the Great Depression, and the radicalisation of movements on the extremes of the political spectrum caused an outburst of violence in February 1934. The corruption affair involved a naturalised Ukrainian Jew by the name of Alexandre Stavisky, who had close ties to Chautemps' centre-left government, which had also just fired a right-wing police chief in Paris.<sup>64</sup> On 6 February right-wing groups took to the streets of Paris, some in the armed fashion of the Italian *squadristi*, most unarmed, all defying the declaration by the new government-loyal police chief that demonstrators would be shot at. The police shot dead fifteen individuals, and the resulting running street battles caused hundreds of non-fatal casualties on both sides.<sup>65</sup> The French left was consequently galvanised into mobilisation, and through a series of inter-party agreements founded the Front Populaire ('Popular Front') movement. The Front Populaire parties were of the understanding that the events of 6 February were tantamount to a fascist coup attempt, and in reaction sought to build a political insurance against a repeat thereof by deepening the ties between the militant communists, the far left, the social democrats, and liberal elements in French politics.<sup>66</sup> This unity-in-diversity-approach to partisan politics had its one and only complete common denominator in antifascism, which Jef Last was profoundly impressed by during his efforts for the IRH which occasionally brought him to Paris, including in late July and August of 1934.<sup>67</sup>

Though Last worked hard in service of the communist cause, it did not provide him with enough income to survive, which led him to seek out contacts at various periodicals and magazines to ask if he could publish his novels and articles in return for modest commissions.<sup>68</sup> Through Eddy du Perron and his close associate Menno ter Braak he eventually secured some income publishing in the Flemish-Dutch literary periodical *Forum* which they ran.<sup>69</sup> It is also through them that Last made the acquaintance of French writers and intellectuals André Malraux, René Crevel, André Breton, and Ilya Ehrenburg, with which he shared strong antifascist convictions and

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<sup>60</sup> Jassies, "Marinus van der Lubbe en de Rijksdagbrand", pp. 31-36

<sup>61</sup> Stutje. "Tussen Hoop en Angst", pp. 58-71

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. see also C.J. Greshoff (ed.) *Correspondance André Gide et Jef Last 1934-1950* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985), pp. 13-14

<sup>64</sup> Jessica Wardhaugh. *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-9* (New York, NY: Springer, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Stutje. "Tussen Hoop en Angst", pp. 58-71

<sup>68</sup> Wester. "Een spel der misverstanden", pp. 71-85

<sup>69</sup> Gillesen, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 64-75

outlooks on literary engagement.<sup>70</sup> Returning from Paris in August, Last travelled to the Soviet Union again, this time not going on tour or working for the CPN; instead he participated in the first congress of the Union of Soviet Writers which was founded by the CPSU after it had disbanded several other writers' unions in 1932.<sup>71</sup> Last's experience of the congress from 17 August to 1 September 1934 was one of utter dejection; the guidelines of socialist realism in literature were laid out, making dissent impossible and producing a uniform matrix for what literature ought to be, to his great dismay.<sup>72</sup> This nevertheless stimulated Last's creativity, and upon returning to the Netherlands he spent two months writing his seminal work, *Zuyderzee*<sup>73</sup>, whilst concurrently working as a reporter for 'De Groene Amsterdammer' on the island of Urk. This novel for the first time openly dealt with homosexuality in a working class setting, and furthermore extensively utilised local regional dialects in much of its dialogues, which was uncommon for the time of writing.<sup>74</sup> When compared to *Het stalen fundament*, *Zuyderzee* is largely apolitical and of a more traditional literary quality. Although it deals with politically sensitive themes, the author merely narrates how these themes are relevant to the characters and how his characters engage with them, without directly making statements about these themes to his audience, unlike in *Het stalen fundament*. The literary quality of *Zuyderzee* opened it up to a far larger audience than *Het stalen fundament* (which exclusively targeted those in the socialist 'zuil'), and therefore attracted moral rather than political scrutiny.<sup>75</sup> *Zuyderzee* was received positively in several literary reviews in the Netherlands and put Last on the literary map of the Interbellum.<sup>76</sup>

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1934 Last participated in the Revolutionary Writers' and Artist's Congress in Paris that was held as a follow-up to the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers. Here he met many of the individuals he had become acquainted with through Du Perron and Ter Braak, but also first met his later long-time friend, the established French writer and literary critic André Gide. They initially bonded strongly over their shared disaffection with the principles of socialist-realist literature, and their unhappiness with the recriminalisation of homosexuality by Stalin of March that year.<sup>77</sup> Gide spoke to Claude Mariac<sup>78</sup> after the Second World War – circa 1950 – about their first meeting in 1934: « Du moment où je l'aperçus dans une réunion publique, me devint si extraordinairement sympathique. Quel garçon étonnant ! Quel dévouement ! Quelle flamme ! Quelle générosité ! Il n'a jamais le sou, bien qu'il eût en Hollande d'immenses succès de librairie, parce qu'il a toujours, autour de lui, des camarades sans feu ni gîte qu'il loge et nourrit... Il a fait tous les métiers. Il sait toutes des langues ».<sup>79</sup> Gide was impressed with Last's multilingualism and considered him to be far more unpretentious than other budding writers and

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<sup>70</sup> Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 64-75

<sup>71</sup> Wester. "Een spel der misverstanden", pp. 71-72

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Lit.: "Southern Sea", the body of water that is nowadays the IJsselmeer.

<sup>74</sup> Tom Sintobin and Wiel Kusters. "'Als een Steen in Oprimpelend Water' Regionaliteit in Jef Last's 'Zuiderzee' (1934)" in *Spiegel der Letteren* 47 no. 2 (2005), pp. 99-146

<sup>75</sup> Sintobin & Kusters. "'Als een Steen in Oprimpelend Water'", pp. 99-146

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondence*, pp. 3-7

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. pp. 13-14

<sup>79</sup> Gide in an interview with Claude Mauriac, in Greshoff, *Correspondence*, pp. 13-14. Lit.: "From the moment I first spotted him at a public meeting, I became extraordinarily sympathetic [to him]. What an astonishing chap! What devotion! What passion! What generosity! He never had a cent, even though he had had great successes publishing in Holland but fed and housed his comrades that had neither food nor hearth. He practices all trades. He knows all kinds of languages".

poets from similarly bourgeois backgrounds. Last conversely recalled the meeting as having gone slightly differently in *Mijn Vriend André Gide*: “Van de schrijvers met wie ik optrad had ik zelfs de namen nooit gehoord. Mijn eigen spreekbeurt kwam pas na de pauze. Gedurende die pauze maakte ik kennis met Gide en vroeg hem of hij mij niet in de eerstkomende dagen een half uur kon ontvangen. Hij was zeer vriendelijk en beleefd, maar weinig toeschietelijk. [...] Toen de vergadering gesloten was en ik naar mijn hotel wilde gaan, hield Gide mij nog even tegen: ‘misschien zou ik u toch morgenochtend kunnen ontvangen wanneer u mij absoluut belooft niet langer dan een halfuur te blijven’.”<sup>80</sup> Their meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 1934 consequently fostered their mutual interest, and according to Last in *Mijn Vriend André Gide* comfortably bled into a long luncheon. Last met Gide’s secretary Mme. Elisabeth van Rysselberghe<sup>81</sup> and Pierre Herbart that day as well, and cemented his firm friendship with Gide with the latter’s permanent invitation to stay with him in Paris rather than a hotel should he find himself there.<sup>82</sup> From then onwards Last would accordingly always have a room at the Rue Vaneau, in Paris’ 7<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.<sup>83</sup>

Throughout November and December of 1934 Last and Gide started corresponding extensively, writing one another letters every four or five days. It is clear from the first letter, incorrectly dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October (it was November), that Last simultaneously wary of and starstruck by Gide and his reputation. Last uses formal openings and formal language in these letters, using ‘Cher maître’ as his salutation rather than the more familiar ‘Cher André’ or ‘Cher Mr. Gide’.<sup>84</sup> Last furthermore goes to lengths to humble himself and makes highly modest and complimentary statements about Gide’s writing style and vocabulary, going as far as to say « J’hésite a vous écrire. [...] Maintenant, en écrivant, je compare mes phrases avec votre langue exquise, et j’ai honte ». <sup>85</sup> This initial slightly sycophantic way of relating to Gide paid off for Last virtually immediately, since Gide was sympathetic to his work for the IRH. Last received significant sums of money – although unclear how significant – from Gide in December 1934 to distribute amongst the Austrian and German refugees he had helped reach France during the autumn of that year.<sup>86</sup> It is also around this time that they exchange manuscripts of their recent works. Last receives *Si le grain ne meurt*<sup>87</sup>, and Gide was presented with the manuscript of *Zuyderzee* which he was unable to read given his lack of fluency in Dutch; Last through contacts in Paris managed to have it

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<sup>80</sup> Lit.: “Of the writers I took the stage with I had never even heard the names of. My own turn only came after the break. During that intermezzo I met Gide, and asked him if he would receive me in the following days. He was friendly and polite, but not very forthcoming. [...] When the meeting was adjourned and I was about to return to my hotel, Gide stopped me briefly: ‘perhaps I can receive you tomorrow morning if you solemnly promise to stay no longer than half an hour’. Last, *Mijn Vriend André Gide*, p. 8

<sup>81</sup> Daughter of Belgian painter Théo van Rysselberghe. She was, for a brief instant in the 1920s, Gide’s lover, and bore him a daughter named Catherine in 1923. From the late 1920s on she became his personal secretary until his death. She lived near the Rue Vaneau at the Rue Vavin.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. The Rue Vaneau was named for a student by that name that was killed in the 1830 July Revolution against the restored Bourbon monarchy. Another notable inhabitant of the street, besides Gide’s household, was Karl Marx, who lived there 1843-45.

<sup>84</sup> Letters from Jef Last to André Gide, 3 November, 7 November, 12 November, 18 December 1934. In Greshoff, *Correspondence*, pp. 19-24

<sup>85</sup> Lit.: “I hesitate to write you. Now, in writing [this], I compare my own phrases to your exquisite language, and I am ashamed”. Letter from Jef Last to André, 3 November 1934 in Greshoff, *Correspondence*, p. 19

<sup>86</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondence*, pp. 22-24

<sup>87</sup> Lit.: “If the grain does not die”; Gide’s autobiography of his early life.

translated and delivered to Gide.<sup>88</sup> The confluence of literary criticism, personal political discussions, and anti-conformist attitudes that Last and Gide exchange so shortly after meeting has a profound impact on the former as a young and aspiring writer, but perhaps not on the latter as the established elderly literary star. Last became more outspoken than he already was, and now had both the contacts and financial backing he needed to take more serious risks in the literary and political sense.<sup>89</sup> In December 1934 he writes an article against the persecution of homosexuals in the Soviet Union since the recriminalisation of such ‘sexual deviance’ earlier that year, which was published in *Fundament* – a party-independent socialist monthly periodical he was a regular contributor to – in March 1935.<sup>90</sup> The magazine *Fundament* in general represented a wider leftist audience than the periodicals of the CPN, and sought to challenge Stalinist interpretations of communism in general. Primary points against which the magazine agitated were Stalinist militarism, the principles of socialist realism, and social conservatism.<sup>91</sup> Last in his article “Een zonde tegen het bloed” (lit.: “[committing] a sin against the blood”) aggressively rejected both Nazi and Soviet arguments that the removal of homosexuals from society would result in a victory for the Aryan race and the Soviet New Man, respectively.<sup>92</sup>

In February 1935, after having exchanged eight letters and a two-month period of silence, Last and Gide met up in Antwerp, where the former could often be found as a result of his efforts for the IRH. Last enjoyed his time in Antwerp, comparing its feverish leftist activity comparable to Berlin before Hitler’s seizure of power.<sup>93</sup> Their meeting there was followed by an invitation from Gide, for Last to join him on a trip to Morocco that was supposed to last through April and May of 1935.<sup>94</sup> The friends travelled to Fez through Spain from Paris from the 19<sup>th</sup> of April onwards. Gide was only in Fez for a few days before developing an acute ear infection and returned to Paris via Algeciras on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April. Last decided to stay in Morocco for some time longer, and eventually ended up traveling with a group of shepherds. On 16 June 1935 he wrote to Gide: « Au Maroc, j’ai été plus heureux que je ne savais, y penser est une ivresse et, même quand j’aurai perdu tout, ces souvenirs me resteront ».<sup>95</sup> This quite dramatic and forward indication of the fact he enjoyed his journey is notable, and although Last does not explicitly speak of his sexual adventures there in his letters, it is almost without doubt that he had quite some if we believe the autobiographic elements of *Een huis zonder vensters* (1935) and the poems of *De bevrijde Eros* (1936).<sup>96</sup>

Last returned to Antwerp in early June 1935, and from the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of June attended the First International Congress for the Defence of Culture with Gide, Malraux, Herbart, and many others from across Europe. The bottom line of the Congress was to unite as many bourgeois

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<sup>88</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 7 November 1934 in Greshoff, *Correspondence*, p. 20

<sup>89</sup> Stutje. “Tussen Hoop en Angst”, pp. 58-71

<sup>90</sup> Jef Last. “Een zonde tegen het bloed” in *Het Fundament – Onafhankelijk tijdschrift voor Politiek, Economie, Cultuur & Literatuur* no. 3 (1935), pp. 35-39. See also Hekma, Gert., Harry Oosterhuis, and James Steakley. “Leftist Sexual Politics and Homosexuality: A Historical Overview” in *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, No. 2/3 (1995), pp. 1-40

<sup>91</sup> Marianne Kröger. “Vervolging, verbanning en het nazi-regime in het tijdschrift Het fundament (1934-1940)” in *Tijdschrift voor Tijdschriftstudies* vol. 3, no. 5-6(1999) pp. 26-35

<sup>92</sup> Last. “Een zonde tegen het bloed”, pp. 35-39

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 19 January 1935 in Greshoff, *Correspondence*, p. 22

<sup>94</sup> Wester, “Een spel der misverstanden”, p. 72-73

<sup>95</sup> Lit.: “In Morocco I was happier than I was aware, and thinking about it is intoxicating, and – even when I’ve lost everything, these memories will remain with me”. Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 16 June 1935 in Greshoff, *Correspondence*, p. 22

<sup>96</sup> Wester, “Een spel der misverstanden”, p. 72-73



artists and writers in support of the Comintern and the Soviet Union. The congress leaned heavily on Gide's presence, and the overall humour of its participants was revolutionary, internationalist, and pro-Soviet owing to its financing by the Comintern, as well as the strong convictions of some of those present. Gide made a variety of mixed statements regarding communism and the society it produced.<sup>97</sup> On the one hand he saw it as the natural, humanist way of life, while on the other hand he argued that individualism was its final product in the artistic sense.<sup>98</sup> Other writers, including Last, similarly held laudatory orations on a communist society as a political objective, but did not shy away from criticising the oppressive practices of the Soviet Union in trying to achieve it. Last's speaking out against the recriminalisation of homosexuality some months earlier had positioned him externally in the camp of the Trotskyite attendees to the Congress, which caused him a great deal of anxiety over the future of his friendship with his benefactor Gide; both career opportunities and his personal safety were effectively on the line.<sup>99</sup> The Stalinists, best represented by Ilya Ehrenburg, and the Trotskyites competed for Gide's attention and presence during the Congress, and employed a variety of tactics ranging from flattery to slander to get him to endorse their agendas. By the end of the Congress it was clear that the Stalinists had managed to claim Gide and started planning an excursion to the Soviet Union in which he must take part. Last was repeatedly asked by acquaintances from his Comintern- and IVRS-days, already then and to his initial dismay, to convince the obstinate Gide to travel there.<sup>100</sup>

Following the feverishly competitive and sectarian Congress, international events in Abyssinia caught Last's attention. Already in July 1935 he had started laying plans to travel there as a journalist, and report on the escalation of hostilities between Abyssinian and Italian forces.<sup>101</sup> Before he was able to secure funds and papers to travel there, the conflict had entered a critical stage, circa October 1935, and Last decided against going there. Instead, he ended up in the town of Noisy-le-Grand, a peripheral of Paris which at that time had started developing working-class slums, and into the 1950s would become one of the main 'Banlieues'. During his time in Noisy-le-Grand, from August through to November 1935, Last finished *Een huis zonder vensters* which contained basically all themes with which he had engaged and struggles since meeting Gide the previous year.<sup>102</sup> In the novel he attempts to develop his position on communism through his characters in an attempt at subverting his earlier literary development in *Zuyderzee*. Falling somewhat short of his objective, he effectively reiterates much of his positions on Stalinist communism he had taken in his article in *Fundament* earlier that year, especially with regard to social conservatism. By making the most unsympathetic character a Stalinist hardliner, Last clearly flirted with a break way from the party, and through the promotion of humane socialist values he simultaneously courted with his old RSAP-era audience. In all, the story highlights the extensiveness of Last's fear for the stuffy narrowmindedness that politically driven art – socialist realist art – instils in both artist and audience. It moreover shows that he radically opposes totalitarianism, and that his hate for it was likely inspired by his bourgeois upbringing in the first place, and matured after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1934. He dampened the criticisms in this book position somewhat by examining the alliance between the French bourgeoisie (i.e. the Front

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<sup>97</sup> Last, *Mijn Vriend André Gide*, pp. 53-55

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Wester, "Een spel der misverstanden", p. 78-79

<sup>101</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondence*, p.23-24

<sup>102</sup> Stutje. "Tussen Hoop en Angst", pp. 58-71

Populaire movement) and Moscow, but in doing so still remains antagonistic to Stalin's Soviet Union in a moral sense.<sup>103</sup> Following his literary efforts on *Een huis zonder vensters*, Last traveled with Gide to the latter's estate at Roquebrune, in the South of France.<sup>104</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks on Chapter 1: inklings of a pattern**

The early political career of Jef Last can without doubt be qualified as turbulent and highly changeable. The process of his radicalisation between 1914 – his momentous visit to Manchester—and his turning away from the SDAP for more revolutionary pastures in the form of the League against Imperialism and Sneevliet's RSAP is fraught with short-lived enthusiasm, intense involvement, all followed by deep disappointment. It is extremely significant that Last on both the short and the long term tended pursue a sense of belonging within political organisations initially, indicating he had a hard time in general fitting. In part, this is likely caused by his closeted bisexuality and the inability to truly be himself privately and publicly until much later (ca. 1934), but his sheltered and bourgeois upbringing was equally potent in making him a perpetual outcast in his self-chosen exile to the working class milieus that so attracted him. This general tension of looking for belonging seems to have made Last prone to throwing himself into newfound potential relationships – potential as well as private – which in turn gave him an energetic and hard-working reputation with those he engaged with. This, however, did not make these bonds less brittle when faced with political or practical realities.

In the political sense the SDAP deeply disappointed Last by forcing him to censor or abandon his anti-colonial, anti-imperialist beliefs which he had for the time being stalled with the LAI. His consequent reaction, renouncing his membership, brought him little closure, and before long he had found a new haven in Sneevliet's RSAP. His career there was extremely short-lived as he went in with more demands than he could account for through sheer hard work and intellectual energy, again creating disappointment through his ejection from the party. Having overcome this disappointment, he threw himself into working for the IVRS and joined the CPH, which brought him to the Soviet Union. There the groundwork was laid for the remainder of the tensions that underpinned the rest of his 1930s. Initially Last experienced the Soviet Union – in 1932 – as a sort of promised land in the strategic and cultural sense. It was to him the international safeguard against fascism, a country whose citizens wanted for little materially, and a haven of literary and artistic experimentation, in which homo- and bisexuality had been decriminalised. The depth of his faith in it is exemplified by *Het stalen fundament* of the summer of 1932, which was a harsh and authoritarian monograph of a quality that can only be described as socialist-realist avant-la-lettre.

The high tide of *Het stalen fundament* was rapidly followed by the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, which tested Last's faith in the Soviet Union, not in the least because he had foreseen it and had been rebuked for stating it. Last's positioning on the side of *Bruinboek* was likely his final attempt at conforming to Bolshevik renditions of the political truth and marks his penultimate effort to remain in the closet for political reasons. This disappointment led Last to work for the IRH from 1933 onwards, to assist German communist refugees under the auspices of the Comintern. Investing himself heavily in this humanitarian work, he regained some of his faith in the Soviet Union in the strategic sense, but remained wary of the tightening of restrictions on

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<sup>103</sup> Stutje. "Tussen Hoop en Angst", pp. 58-71.

<sup>104</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondence*, p. 28

artistic output. When the principles of socialist realism were announced in Summer 1934, Last was extremely disappointed, as he felt it would stifle society as a whole, and return it to a bourgeois state of social conservatism. He turned out to be correct, as shortly afterwards homosexuality was recriminalized and the persecution of LGBT individuals there rapidly turned into a moral crusade-annex-witch-hunt which came to mirror the persecution of these people in now Nazi-dominated Germany.

The meeting of André Gide was a momentous occasion for Last, and following his deep disappointment with the Soviet Union's cultural policies gave him a new friend and kindred spirit. Gide helped Last find some peace regarding his sexuality, but conversely also inspired Last to engage with it in the political sense. Shortly after their meeting in October 1934, in Spring 1935, Last would start publicly agitating against the Soviet persecution of homosexuals, likening it to the persecution they suffered Nazi Germany in an article in an independent socialist magazine. The fact that he published there, and not in a CPH-periodical is of great significance, as it means that he already in 1935 viewed the CPH as an extension of the Soviet Union, and was willing to bypass that party to express political views he held deeply but were out of line with the party's direction. Concurrently Last remained an active contributor to the IRH, retaining something of a direct relationship with the Comintern, and therefore not completely abandoning communism as an ideology in its entirety. Under the auspices of Gide he however did start questioning the strategic intentions of the Soviet Union more and more, whilst also experiencing a growing fear for the rising tide of fascism.

## **Chapter 2 – El Capitán Jef Last | 1936-37**

### **January-August 1936 – Antwerp and the fourth Soviet journey**

In the early days of 1936 Jef Last returned from his lengthy stay with André Gide in the town of Roquebrune in the French Provence. Finding himself visiting Paris virtually every month for various reasons, and given the fact that his work for both the CPN and the IRH took him to Belgium often, Last decided to permanently relocate his small household from Amsterdam to Antwerp.<sup>105</sup> The remainder of January he spent working on the manuscript of what would become *Kruisgang der Jeugd* together with German emigré poet and labour activist Harry Wilde who he had befriended the previous year through Gide.<sup>106</sup> Between late January and early May 1936 Last contracted an illness, whilst also living in terrible poverty, somewhat of his own choice; the medical treatment he required was funded by Gide after he contacted him on 24 April.<sup>107</sup> Though he was in poor health, circumstances did not seem to have tempered his desire to work and travel for the antifascist cause. The Dutch pacifist youth magazine *Vredesstrijd*<sup>108</sup> lists Last as one of the speakers of a writer's conference in IJmuiden on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 1936 in their March edition.<sup>109</sup> Concurrently, Gide – to his own annoyance – had now been formally invited by the Soviet authorities to embark on a tour of Moscow and the Black Sea coast. Last, although he was anxious about the prospect of returning to Stalin's Soviet Union which he now reviled, wrote letters to Gide in which he displayed excitedness to go on another journey together.<sup>110</sup>

Gide's aversion to traveling to Soviet Union had several layers, only some of which he discussed with Last. Given Gide's status as a cultural totem of the PCF and within the Front Populaire movement, he expected to be treated as such, which he correctly imagined would lead to extreme scrutiny, undue attentions, and few if any chances to have frank conversations with Soviet citizens.<sup>111</sup> Malraux, Ehrenburg, and Louis Aragon all contended that the visit was in his own political interest and that it would aid relations between the Front Populaire government and Moscow.<sup>112</sup> In late June Last, Eugene Dabit, Louis Guilloux, and Jacques Schiffrin departed for Leningrad by ship, whilst André Gide travelled to Moscow by air in July.<sup>113</sup> During their tour of the Black Sea region, Gide became increasingly dejected with the state of affairs in Stalin's Soviet Union, and often objected to the special treatment that was lavished upon him and his fellow travellers, as is apparent the correspondence between him and Last of early September 1936.<sup>114</sup> Last found himself in agreement with Gide's inclinations, but was dissimilarly affected by it, as he from his 1934 journey knew what to expect.<sup>115</sup> In an absurd sexual encounter with a sailor in

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<sup>105</sup> Gillese. "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 72-75

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide 24 April 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 28-29. See also Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", p. 77

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide 24 April 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 28-29

<sup>108</sup> Lit.: "The Struggle for Peace".

<sup>109</sup> Advert."15e Schrijversavond, IJmuiden" in *Vredesstrijd* no. 6, vol. 38, p. 44. It must furthermore be remarked that Last was invited more often by pacifist (youth) organisations, and that he is twice more listed as a speaker at writer's conferences during September of 1936. There is evidence to suggest he attended the conference in early September, whereas it is impossible he attended the one on 23 September.

<sup>110</sup> Rensen. "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 173-184; and Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 29

<sup>111</sup> Wester, "Een spel der misverstanden", p. 79-80

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 84-87

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Sochumi he experienced to what extent Stalin's totalitarian approach to communism had instilled almost bourgeois patterns of thinking and talking about politics. This encounter for him confirmed the return of a sexual puritanism he so detested and feared.<sup>116</sup> As he describes in *Mijn vriend André Gide* (1966), the sailor simultaneously engages in passionate intercourse, whilst also constantly lecturing Last about the merits and achievements of the CPSU; there is some doubt as to the veracity of this account, but if it is true it is lamentable.<sup>117</sup> Besides these grotesque ills, disagreements in the fellowship also erupted. Last and Dabit almost had a physical altercation in Sevastopol when they could not agree on whether it was a good idea to travel to Spain to support the Republic in the wake of the failed military coup of 18 July 1936. Dabit, a veteran of the trenches of the First World War, and Gide eventually talked Last out of his gung-ho attitude to volunteering for the conflict for a time.<sup>118</sup>

The journey took a turn for the worse over the course of August, as the prelude to the Moscow Trials (19-24 August) against Kamenev and Zinoviev catapulted Soviet society into mass paranoia. Accounts of their purported misdeeds were published in Soviet newspapers as a means of legitimising the arrest, torture, and trial by Stalin, and Last and Gide both realised that this was a new phase in Stalin's plans for the Soviet Union, and furthermore understood it would negatively affect the Front Populaire government's credibility and the newly erupted Spanish Civil War.<sup>119</sup> The Black Sea tour ended early for all participants, in different and unfortunate ways. Schifffrin and Gelloux had already abandoned the fellowship on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July, and Gide and Hebart had travelled back to Moscow following their stay in the Caucasus. Last and Dabit ended their journey in Sevastopol in a most unfortunate way. Dabit had contracted a fever before departing Sochi for Sevastopol, where it eventually developed into a serious bout of illness, which he did not survive.<sup>120</sup> Last stayed with Dabit until shortly before his untimely death, linking up with Gide somewhere around the 12th-15th of August for their journey back to France.<sup>121</sup> Last returned to Antwerp on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1936.

Back in Antwerp, Last suffered a desperate episode regarding his personal politics. In a letter he wrote to Gide on 29 August 1936, this desperation is palpable as he writes about his political insecurity and how « comme chaque mot peut etre plein de consequences je ne vraiment sais pas quoi repondre ».<sup>122</sup> His experiences on the journey to the Soviet Union returned him to the crisis of faith he thought he had left behind in 1935, during his stay in Paris.<sup>123</sup> He had previously felt increasingly excluded and isolated by the sexual puritanism, the economic injustices

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<sup>116</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 173-177.

<sup>117</sup> Last. *Mijn vriend André Gide*, pp. 127-133.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Wester, "Een spel der misverstanden", p. 78-79. Dabit died in Sevastopol on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 1936. In the 1960s Louis Aragon would speculate what exact disease it was and how Dabit contracted it. In his understanding it could either have been undiagnosed epidemic typhus or a successful attempt at poisoning, probably orchestrated by the NKVD through the GPU. Since there is little evidence to substantiate this matter we can only speculate, but it does seem plausible that the GPU kept tabs on the fellowship, and may have sought to curb the foremost critics among them, including Last and Gide. See Louis Aragon, *La mise à mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) pp. 39-43.

<sup>121</sup> Wester, "Een spel der misverstanden", 71-85.

<sup>122</sup> Lit.: "As each word can be consequential [on the matter] I truly do not know how to answer [their questions]". Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 20 August 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 30. See also Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", p. 177

<sup>123</sup> Gillese. "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 75-81

(i.e. the becoming bourgeois again of the nomenklatura), and the artistically limiting character of the party line in the Soviet Union in 1934 during his visit there, and developed a fear for it in Noisy-le-Grand during the writing of *Een huis zonder vensters*.<sup>124</sup> To see those trappings intensified in the Soviet Union two years later, and much of the line's core elements exported to communist movements abroad – including in the Netherlands – Last was desperate to find a place in or adjacent to the communist movement that rejected these trappings.<sup>125</sup> Wester, Stutje, and Rensen all qualify this trip as being catastrophic for Last's morale, though they do not view it as necessarily chiefly underpinning his breaking with communism.

The deterioration of the Soviet utopia that he had idolised before 1934 needed to be replaced with a new utopia, or at least a similar sort of 'promised land'. Last had found foundations of this in the Spanish Second Republic during his transit to Morocco in 1935.<sup>126</sup> Since his layover in Madrid in Spring 1935 he kept up to date with the political situation there. Especially the strategic value of Spain became a growing interest of his after Hitler's consolidation of power in Germany – his other great fear – and the intensifying of reactionary sentiments in the countries bordering France after the establishment of the Front Populaire in 1934 and its coming to power in the elections of May 1936.<sup>127</sup> Though Gide and the late Dabit had managed to talk him out of immediately volunteering for the Spanish front, Last in late August began to view such a commitment of his life to the Republican cause as a potential way of redeeming himself in the political sense.<sup>128</sup> The flood of reports that had come out of Spain since the start of the Civil War confirmed many of Last's hopes about the relative pristineness and unadulterated style of socialist and communist practices there, which had galvanised him into action by the middle of September 1936.<sup>129</sup> Even though his mind was firmly set on going to Spain, he also remained active as a writer and speaker at a variety of events in the first two weeks of September. A salient detail is that his activity seems to have primarily been limited to pacifist organisations, such as *Vredesstrijd*, which had invited him to speak in Amsterdam on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September.<sup>130</sup>

## September 1936- January 1937 – The Madrilenian front

Instead of organising his journey to Spain through CPN channels, Last decided to make his way to Spain of his own accord. This decision made him one of the very few Dutch volunteers to do so and succeed.<sup>131</sup> Gide once again was his benefactor, as in the case of his illness earlier that year, and contacted André Malraux.<sup>132</sup> He left for Spain via Paris on the 20th of September, and travelled to Madrid without much issue, for which he had Malraux to thank.<sup>133</sup> Malraux had been appointed

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<sup>124</sup> Stutje, "Tussen hoop en angst", pp. 58-71

<sup>125</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", p. 176-177

<sup>126</sup> Gillese. "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 76-78

<sup>127</sup> Stutje, "Tussen hoop en angst", pp. 58-71

<sup>128</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", p. 177

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 177-178

<sup>130</sup> Back page/local news column Amsterdam. "De Revolutie in Spanje – Sprekers 23 September" in *De Syndicalist – Weekblad van het Nederlandsch Syndicalistisch Vakbevend* [associated with the First International, Spanish chapter, Bakuninist in signature] no. 12, Vol XIV (1936), p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> Samuël Kruizinga. "The First Resisters: Tracing Three Dutchmen from the Spanish Trenches to the Second World War, 1936–1945" in *War in History* (2019) forthcoming, pp.1-19

<sup>132</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 28-29

<sup>133</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", p. 178-179. It is not entirely clear how exactly he travelled to Spain but given Malraux's connections in the Aviation Ministry it seems likely he flew to his destination rather than taking the

as special envoy to the Spanish Republic by Pierre Cot, the Minister of Aviation for the Front Populaire government in the summer of 1936, and was attached to the Republican Air Force as a ‘civilian advisor’.<sup>134</sup> In practice Malraux was an underqualified aviation enthusiast that sold obsolete French aircraft for the Blum-government to the Republic at exorbitant rates, and extracted ditto fees for pilot, personnel, and ground-crew training.<sup>135</sup> Malraux had many connections in Madrid, and arranged a variety of papers and passes for Last upon his arrival that would allow him to join a military or militia formation of his own election.<sup>136</sup>

It is on the topic of Last’s arrival that the scholars in the debate cannot seem to agree nor provide a thorough accounting of his precise steps. Though all of their works – save for that of Kruizinga – confirm that Last arrived in Madrid on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1936, his whereabouts and activities in the city between then and the 29<sup>th</sup> of September are unverifiable from their accounts.<sup>137</sup> In a letter of 15 June 1937 he does however claim that he arrived the 20<sup>th</sup> of September together with Harry Domela, and that they immediately went to the Fifth Regiment upon arrival.<sup>138</sup> Given the heavily censored and policed political atmosphere of the months after the ‘Barcelona May Days’ this is likely contrived for self-censorship purposes and seems to be in contradiction with various other pieces of evidence.<sup>139</sup>

Wester, Stutje, Gillese, and even Renssen claim that upon his arrival he joined a militia unit that was part of the renowned ‘Quinto Regimiento’ (‘Fifth Regiment’) led by Enrique Lister.<sup>140</sup> In fact, the so-called ‘Columna Sargento Vazquez’ which Last had joined – but only described in his letter of the 10<sup>th</sup> October – was one of the many militias present on the Madrilenian front that was in fact not contiguous to either the Partido Comunista de Espana (‘Communist Party of Spain’; PCE) or the Fifth Regiment.<sup>141</sup> The semi-autobiographic history by Robert G. Colodny, an American volunteer of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, details the order-of-battle for the many militia units in and around Madrid in 1936-37, when he himself was stationed at Brunete. The order-of-battle of the militia system in Madrid in late 1936 was based almost exclusively on cross-references of orders-of-battle and combat reports that were published in the Marxist magazine ‘*Inprecor*’, which was financed by the Fourth International.<sup>142</sup> Though biased, these accounts are

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train across the border. Last’s precise whereabouts from 20 to 23 September are cause for further interest. See also Kruizinga. “The First Resisters”, pp. 4-5, who claims that Last arrived the 26<sup>th</sup>, and not the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September.

<sup>134</sup> Beevor. *The Battle for Spain*, p. 140.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 140-141. In *The Battle for Spain* Beevor describes Malraux as a cynical individual that was a “mythomaniac in his claims of martial heroism ... because he exploited the opportunity for intellectual heroism in the legend of the Spanish Civil War”.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 15 June 1937 in Jef Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1962), p. 92

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> The core and cadre of the Fifth Regiment were exclusively made up out of PCE-members and sympathisers. During and after the Battle of Madrid it attracted many thousands to the ranks of that party for its tenacity and ferocity in the street fighting that lasted throughout the late summer and early autumn of 1936. Although its ranks were exclusively communist, it was one of the few relatively militarised units, and consequently provided facilities and training to non-PCE militia’s that were part of the Republican forces in the area. See Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 127.

<sup>141</sup> Robert G. Colodny and Beth Luey (editor, 2009 edition). *The Struggle for Madrid – The central epic of the Spanish conflict 1936-37* (New York, NY: Paine-Whitman, 1958/2009), pp. 19-20 and 158.

<sup>142</sup> Colodny & Luey, *The Struggle for Madrid*, p. 158

likely authentic since they include data on units and organisations that would later be eliminated by late 1938 in the wake of the PCE's seizure of all power instruments.<sup>143</sup>

Out of the roughly twenty leftist militia battalions formed between October 1934 and July 1936, the Sargento Vazquez was one of ten battalions that was not controlled by and organised through the PCE, and hence not consolidated into the Fifth Regiment during the fighting in August and September. Fighting under the supervision and guidance of the 'Milicias Antifascistas Obreras y Campesinas' ('Antifascist Workers' and Farmers Militias; MAOC), the Sargento Vazquez seems to have attracted a wide variety of individuals with heterogeneous political leanings.<sup>144</sup> This organisation was an amalgam of various party- and union-militias that had been set up by leftist organisations in 1934 as a response to the (para-)militarisation of the Falange and right-wing organisations. Though it was not directly controlled by any singular organisation, the name of the battalion comes from a martyr of the 1934 Asturias Miner's Strike, that was associated with the Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol ('Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; PSOE), the Union General de Trabajadores ('General Union of Workers; UGT), and potentially even the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo ('National Confederation of Labour'; CNT).<sup>145</sup> Sergeant Diego Vazquez Corbacho was a native of Ceuta, Spanish Morocco, and as an infantryman in the Fuerzas Regulares Indigenas de Ceuta<sup>146</sup> deserted his unit in Oviedo to join the revolting miners.<sup>147</sup> Following General Franco's crushing of the revolt he was apprehended, court-martialled, and executed in 1935.<sup>148</sup> The story of his leftist martyrdom suggests that the battalion named after him primarily attracted trade unionists of the UGT and CNT, catered to anti-authoritarian leftists from the PSOE, and also consisted of individuals with more anarchist and syndicalist leanings than PCE-adepts.<sup>149</sup> There is further military-administrative evidence, provided by the excellent study by Lisa Lines, that the unit until quite late in 1937 harboured individuals – women specifically – that belonged to the POUM that had fallen afoul of the PCE-dominated government of the Republic.<sup>150</sup>

For the case of Jef Last this produces an interesting series of new questions. Given the fact that Wester, Stutje, Gillese, and Rensen all glossed over the nature and origin of the Sargento Vazquez battalion, its relationship with the Fifth Regiment, and its political origins their treatment of Last's time in Spain must be critically assessed in light thereof. This information further discredits the account of Last's Spanish adventure by Kruizinga.<sup>151</sup> He puts the arrival date of Last

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<sup>143</sup> Colodny & Luey, *The Struggle for Madrid*, p. 158.

<sup>144</sup> Last describes the variety of characters joining the unit in his first letter to his wife Ida ter Haar on October 10<sup>th</sup>. See Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 45, 127 and Carlos Engel. *Historia de las Brigadas Mixtas del Ejército Popular de la República* (Madrid, Almena, 1999). See also Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 10 October 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 16-19

<sup>145</sup> Vicente A. Menéndez González. "El Sargento Vázquez, el militar olvidado de la Revolución de Asturias de 1934" in *Foro Milicia y Democracia* Special Edition: '80 Aniversario de la Revolución de 1934' (2014), introduction.

<sup>146</sup> The 'Regulares' drew men from both the Spanish and Moroccan population in the Moroccan littoral of Spanish Morocco. Though ethnically and religiously mixed, the units were colloquially referred to as 'Moorish' units.

<sup>147</sup> Menéndez González. "El Sargento Vázquez".

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Michael Alpert. *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 29-37

<sup>150</sup> Lisa Lines. "Female Combatants in the Spanish Civil War: Milicianas on the Front Lines and in the Rearguard" in *Journal of International Women's Studies* no. 4, Vol. 10 (2009), pp. 168-187

<sup>151</sup> Kruizinga, "The First Resisters", pp. 4-5



in Spain on 26 September, which is discredited by Rensen and Wester's use of documentation.<sup>152</sup> The way in which Last travelled to Spain (of his own account instead of through the CPN), the fact that he joined a militia that was not aligned to the PCE, and the fact that he was not denied enlistment by the MAOC or the Republican government suggest that there is a strong case to be made for his agency in the matter. If he indeed, with the help of Malraux and Gide, purposely and knowingly joined a non-PCE, majority anarcho-syndicalist militia it is manifest that he made those choices with the intent of a) bypassing Soviet scrutiny, and b) actively taking measures to break with the Moscow-led communist movement. It moreover provides a far more direct and logical foundation for the adversity he faced from the CPN commissariat in Madrid during much of 1937 and explains his court-martialing in July-August of that year as well.

Alternatively, in the case that his joining the Columna Sargento Vazquez somehow was a product of chance, several questions regarding his status as a foreigner in Republican service before the founding of the International Brigades rise. Why was he not turned away by the MAOC as so many others? It is certainly possible that his limited military background (i.e. his time as a naval militiaman), multilingualism (though he did not yet speak Spanish), and international personal network played a leading role in his, but it still does not fully clear his case of critical suspicion. Further questions are; where and how did Gide and Malraux intercede on his behalf, and who did they convince of his political reliability in the paranoid atmosphere of the Civil War? Since these are all difficult questions in their own right, and the evidence strongly suggests otherwise, Last almost certainly made a purposeful and informed choice in the case of this militia unit.

Last was induced as a recruit into the Columna Sargento Vazquez, a battalion that had been fighting in Madrid since July and received most of its replacements through the headquarters of the Fifth Regiment. The Fifth Regiment had initially occupied the Cuartel de la Montaña but was eventually forced to abandon this and move to the Salesian monastery in the Tetuán neighbourhood of Madrid.<sup>153</sup> Between 25 September and 10-11 October 1936 Last would receive basic – if not lacking – military training in Madrid, whilst Nationalist forces advanced on the city from the South, West, and Northwest.<sup>154</sup> The first letter Last wrote in the barracks in Madrid is – somewhat surprisingly given the latter's pacifist persuasion – to André Gide. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of September he wrote that: « Tout ce que je peux dire, c'est que rarement dans ma vie j'ai été si heureux que présent », and that « Toute la vie à Madrid est d'une beauté et d'un héroïsme inouïs ». <sup>155</sup> He continued his letter in a similar superlative cadence, praising especially the simplicity and kindness of his comrades-in-arms.<sup>156</sup> In the same letter he also claimed that he enrolled with the Fifth Regiment, as we have previously established was not entirely the case, which is probably also wrongly copied by the scholars in the debate.<sup>157</sup> In my understanding this is a conscious oversimplification of matters by Last to inform Gide of his activities.<sup>158</sup>

It was not until the 10<sup>th</sup> of October that Last penned the first long letter to his wife, in which he describes the motivations for joining up of his comrades-in-arms in the barracks in

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<sup>152</sup> Kruizinga, "The First Resisters", pp. 4-5, and Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", p. 178-179.

<sup>153</sup> Letters from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 12 October 1936 and 15 June 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp 19-25 and 92

<sup>154</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, p. 150

<sup>155</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 29 September 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 32-33

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

Madrid. Detailing the various European origins of these characters, he contraposes the label given to them by the Spanish authorities – ‘foreigners’ – with the seemingly effortless sense of unity that all of these men found in their common hate for the fascists, which he derides for being called ‘nationalists’, and the significance of their defence of democracy in Spain.<sup>159</sup> This notion of ‘democracy’ rarely pops up in earlier writing, and in this case is particularly significant because he uses it opposition to fascism, whilst hinting with it at his opposition to authoritarian communism. Last’s second letter to his wife is dated 12 October 1936 and is different in subject matter, and slightly longer than his previous communication. He wrote of his deployment to the front at the Sierra Guadarrama where he was stationed near the village of Navalperal de Pinares, 80km west of Madrid, of the atrocities committed by the Nationalists in Toledo following its capture, and of the general mood in his militia company.<sup>160</sup> Of some interest is his detailed description of the young men in his company that sang leftist war songs during their march to the trains, which is positively and openly homoerotic.<sup>161</sup> Conversely, he also discussed the collective reaction of the company when political officers from Madrid arrived to give them the news of their relief by troops from Aragón and the formal decree of the Largo Caballero-administration that was supposed to consolidate the militias into the regular Republican Army.<sup>162</sup> He noted: “Drie dagen later keerde onze compagnie met verlof naar Madrid terug. Zij, die met de militarisatie akkoord gingen, konden zich twee dagen later weer aan de kazerne melden. Vanmorgen, op de binnenplaats, heb ik hen allen weergezien. Orubio, José, Nicasio en onze Jezus die de woordvoerder was der anarchisten”.<sup>163</sup> The sympathy he expressed for his anarchist comrades and his focus on the humanist qualities of the young men in the company are extremely telling for Last’s newfound defiance against Moscow, and his recovery from the disappointment that was his journey to the Soviet Union with Gide. It moreover marks Last’s first statements regarding his precise new political association; where he had previously worked hard to appease the CPN, these letters are a clear break from that intent.

Between 20 and 23 October Last spent time in Madrid on a brief furlough, where he learned of the Catholic intellectual José Bergamín. He had convened the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals – known colloquially as ‘the Alianza’ – in Madrid, which attracted various writers and intellectuals from the Iberian Peninsula, Latin America, and France.<sup>164</sup> In the magazine *Cruz y Raya* Bergamín fostered intellectual discussion on a human-centric practice of religion and of politics that eventually took on a revolutionary posture in the mid-1930s. Following the eruption of the Civil War in July 1936 he had declared for the Republic and became an advocate for a form of humane socialism rooted in social progressivism, distantly based on Catholic morality and charity.<sup>165</sup> Last was captivated – as is clear from his letters of October 1936 – by Bergamín’s brand of humane socialism and was strengthened in his personal resolve that a multilaterally intelligible

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<sup>159</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 10 October 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 16-19

<sup>160</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 12 October 1936, Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p.19-21

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 23. See also Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 167-168 and Michael Alpert. *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 37, 44-49, 66-70

<sup>163</sup> Lit.: “Three days later our company returned to Madrid on leave. Those who agreed with militarization could report to the barracks two days later. This morning, in the courtyard, I saw them all again. Orubio, José, Nicasio and our Jesus [sic] who was the spokesperson for the anarchists”. Ibid, p. 24-25

<sup>164</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida Ter Haar, 20 October 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*., pp. 25-28. See also Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 29 September 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 33.

<sup>165</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 23 October 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 29-37

form of ‘true’ communism was achievable through this focus on humaneness.<sup>166</sup> Besides his meeting with Bergamín of the 22<sup>nd</sup> October, he discussed the significant improvements in the quality of drill his unit received in the barracks, and praised his comrades-in-arms for the developments they had made in their combat capabilities, whilst conversely lamenting the lack of fundamental knowledge of modern military conduct; “De enorme betekenis bijvoorbeeld van prikkeldraad als verdediging tegen cavalerieaanvallen wordt nog hoegenaamd niet begrepen”.<sup>167</sup>

From October 23 to 27 Last was back at the front at Navalperal de Pinares in the Sierra, defending against General Mola’s drive on Madrid from the North.<sup>168</sup> From 28 October to 2 November he returned to Madrid, and described how much the city had changed in the brief period he had spent at the front. Last states that where the city had remained leisurely and socially active some days before, it was now awash with passionately mobilised civilians and soldiers alike.<sup>169</sup> In a letter to his wife on November 2<sup>nd</sup> he wrote of his new deployment sector, this time to the Southwest of Madrid, in Getafe.<sup>170</sup> Concurrently he sent multiple letters to Gide in Paris, expressing his hope that Gide would come to Madrid to see the bright examples of humane socialism he had discovered for himself there.<sup>171</sup> Though he was once again reluctant to accede to the invitation, he did reply that he would consider it. Moreover, Gide replied that he had finished his travelogue of the journey to the Soviet Union some months earlier, and that it was due to be published sometime in the third week of November.<sup>172</sup> Last replied from the trenches at Getafe and implored Gide to delay the publication of his book, as the Soviet Union had newly committed itself to aiding the Republican cause.<sup>173</sup> In the letter Last argued that a new phase began in the struggle between fascism and communism both in Spain and worldwide, and that the only viable ally of the Spanish Republic could at that moment be the Soviet Union, since France had ratified the Non-Intervention Pact.<sup>174</sup> He noted that Louis Aragon was of much the same conviction, and that Malraux was also similarly inclined, and declared that he categorically refused to read it for the foreseeable future.<sup>175</sup> Quite surprisingly Rensen, Wester, and Kruizinga do not attribute much to this back-and-forth within Last’s relationship to the Soviet Union; in their analyses these statements in his letters to Gide tend to get relegated to overall notion that he, as a writer, was engaged in the propaganda effort to support the Republic.

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November Nationalist troops had defeated the Republican forces to the West and Southwest of Madrid, and had advanced past Brunete, Leganes, onto Getafe and the suburb of Carabanchel.<sup>176</sup> Between 4 and 7 November the Nationalists prepared an attack across the entire Southern and Western line, to gain control of the Casa de Campo, the suburbs of Carabanchel and Villaverde Alto, and secure positions along the Manzanares river that ran the length of the Western

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<sup>166</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 23 October 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 29-37.

<sup>167</sup> Lit.: “The significance of barbed wire as a means of defending against cavalry attacks was completely unknown to them”. Ibid., p. 36

<sup>168</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 2 November 1936, in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 38-40. See also Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 174-182

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Letters from Jef Last to André Gide, 23 October, 1 November 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 33-35

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., see also Rensen, “*El Capitán Jef Last*”, p. 183

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 174-184

edge of Madrid.<sup>177</sup> The attack was launched the 8<sup>th</sup> of November but was repulsed by Republican militias at the Casa de Campo, broke through but failed to consolidate a foothold in Carabanchel, and succeeded in pushing back the Republicans at Villaverde Alto.<sup>178</sup> On 9 and 10 November Republican counterattacks produced no results and high numbers of casualties, especially among the newly arrived XI International Brigade.<sup>179</sup> From 11 to 15 November several battalions' worth of militia companies were routed by Regulares in Villaverde Alto, including Last's company of the Sargento Vazquez.<sup>180</sup> Even though his company had broken and fled, Last – together with other 'foreigners' – remained active in (re)organising defensive efforts throughout the battle, which later earned him a promotion from militiaman to 'Cabo' or Corporal.<sup>181</sup> During a lull in the fighting he found time to write to Gide again, this time to express his wholehearted support for the publication of his travelogue titled *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*; he added that Gide could publish this show of support should he have wished to.<sup>182</sup> He makes no mention of whether or not he would read it or had read any of it, but it seems like he was aware of its critical nature towards the Soviets and the agitation against Stalinism in it through his association with other writers at the Alianza.<sup>183</sup> This letter was written by Last with heavy foreboding that he might not survive the battle and wished primarily to be in harmony with his greatest friend.<sup>184</sup>

In two letters to his wife –dated 16 and 18 November – he detailed his experience of the rout at Getafe and the defeat at Villaverde. The letter of the 16<sup>th</sup> is written in curt and clear terms due to the state of sheer mental and physical exhaustion he was in after the end of the battle for Villaverde. This letter was also an attempt at valiant defiance, but the fact that he expressed a sense of doubt as to whether victory was still a possibility: “Wanneer de fascistien Madrid binnenrukken, dan zal het zijn in een stad van louter ruines waar het laatste huis nog wordt verdedigd” makes it fall short of its intention.<sup>185</sup> He also relates the struggle for Madrid to the international cause of antifascism: “Het proletariet van Madrid weet dat het niet slechts zijn eigen leven, maar ook dat van andere volkeren verdedigt. Beseft men dat in Holland?”.<sup>186</sup> The letter of the 18<sup>th</sup> is long by contrast, and contains implicit criticism of both the military leadership of the Republican Army, as well as the Soviet Union. His main gripe with the Republican leadership was the constant state of indecision it seemed to be in tactically due to the mutual distrust of anarchist and communist officers, which led to poor frontline discipline and incoherent orders that in Last's view compounded normal human reactions to the violence of combat into animalistic behaviour.<sup>187</sup> In a sideways stab at the lack of Soviet material aid he decries the fact that they were forced to rely on “... twee machinegeweren [die] dateerden uit de middeleeuwen”, “een prullige pantserwagen”,

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<sup>177</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 174-184.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., see also Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 16 November 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 40 and 42-48

<sup>181</sup> Rensen, “*El Capitán Jef Last*”, p. 178 and Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, p. 95

<sup>182</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 14 November 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 36

<sup>183</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 16 November 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 36-37

<sup>184</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 14 November 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 36

<sup>185</sup> Lit: “When the fascists enter Madrid, it will be a city in ruins where every last house will still be defended”. Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 16 November 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 40

<sup>186</sup> Lit.: “The proletariat of Madrid knows that it defends not only its own existence, but also that of other people's. Are they aware of that in Holland?”. Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar 20 November 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 42

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 42-48

and possessed no tools to dig better trenches and shelters with.<sup>188</sup> He ended the letter by arguing that the defeat was a nasty experience from the personal perspective, but tactically had achieved only a minor advance on the city centre, and was therefore not necessarily as horrible as alarmists had made it out to be.<sup>189</sup>

Immediately after these letters to his wife, Last and the 4<sup>th</sup> company of the Sargento Vazquez were transferred to the frontline near the northern edge of the Casa de Campo that bordered on the Ciudad Universitaria.<sup>190</sup> Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of November he would remain there on shifts, taking the metro back and forth to the barracks.<sup>191</sup> In a letter to his wife on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November he expressed the bitter hatred he held towards the Nationalist aviators, comparing them to the Huns of yore: “Zelfs de horden van Atilla hebben hun eigen hoofdstad niet vernield en hun wapens niet gebruikt om de vrouwen en kinderen van hun eigen volk uit te moorden”.<sup>192</sup> The battalion was shifted in an Easterly direction onto the Ciudad Universitaria front on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December after the main battle there had concluded a week before.<sup>193</sup> Concurrently, Last was promoted to the rank of ‘Alférez’, or Lieutenant.<sup>194</sup> Last would remain at the front before the Ciudad Universitaria until the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, and in the meantime corresponded extensively with André Gide, imploring him to help him get a safe conduct pass so he could travel to Paris if Gide was not inclined to visit Spain in the meantime.<sup>195</sup>

Gide arranged a safe conduct for Last through his friend and Nobel laureate Roger Martin du Gard, who had warned him in a letter of the enduring interest of the Soviet GPU in Last and his activities.<sup>196</sup> Gide does not seem to have communicated this to Last based on their correspondence, as he felt that Last knew of this interest since the GPU operated in Amsterdam throughout the 1930s.<sup>197</sup> Last wrote his last letter of 1936 from the front between the Manzanares and the Ciudad Universitaria to his wife on 10 December. In the letter he recalled how he had spent time instructing the men in his platoon and the other platoons of the company in the strategic logic of their struggle in Spain.<sup>198</sup> The explanation he gave in this letter expands on the reasons he gave Gide for the struggle in his letter of 3 November.<sup>199</sup> From halfway December Last managed to travel to Paris, where he arrived on the 20<sup>th</sup> to stay with Gide for a few days before leaving for Amsterdam.<sup>200</sup> On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December he sent Gide a letter with writerly critique on *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.*, which was surprisingly positive, given his position on the book some months earlier.<sup>201</sup> Based on their correspondence, Last read at least the first half of *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.* during his stay

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<sup>188</sup> Lit: “Two machine-guns that dated from the middle ages” and “a dingy armoured car”. Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 18 November 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48

<sup>190</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 24 November 1936. In Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 49-50

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Lit.: “Even Atilla’s hordes have never destroyed their own capital or used their weapons to murder the women and children of their own people”. Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 24 November 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 50.

<sup>193</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 189

<sup>194</sup> Rensen, “*El Capitán Jef Last*”, p. 178 and Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, p. 95

<sup>195</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 26 November 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 37-39

<sup>196</sup> Letter from André Gide to Roger Martin du Gard, 3 December 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 36

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 10 December 1936 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 55

<sup>199</sup> Letters from Jef Last to André Gide, 3 and 29 December 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp.34-36 and 37-39

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

with Gide at Vaneau.<sup>202</sup> Though he and Gide agreed with each other on the desirability and necessity for a more humanitarian approach in socialism and leftist internationalism, they had disagreements on how to qualify the Soviet Union and its role therein. They both agreed that the persecution of sexual deviants was bad but were unable to find common ground regarding the role of individualism outside of the realm of arts, in the social contract. In the argument Last defended a more collectivist approach to life outside art, whereas Gide is convinced that collectivism virtually always led to totalitarianism and the stifling of daily life and art alike. Last furthermore attempted to convince Gide that although the Soviet Union had now turned for the worse, it was not always that way, and many good events, actions, and facts had come before it. In short, Gide and Last did not disavow the Soviet Union to the same degree; oddly enough Last still seemed to hold a modicum of faith in it deep down for strategic reasons, where Gide is ready from the start to reject it for all it was and had been.<sup>203</sup> In the letter Last for the first time also openly criticizes Mikhail Koltsov, the NKVD-vetted main propagandist of the Soviets in Spain.<sup>204</sup> Last spent time in the Jordaan, Amsterdam with his wife, returning to Paris in mid-January 1937.<sup>205</sup>

### **February-November 1937 – In service of the Republic?**

Last spent 17-20 January in Gide's home in Paris and travelled back to Spain the 21st of that month and decided to keep his travel papers; this would later on prove extremely fore-sighted. On his journey to Spain the news reaches him that a socialist writer's congress was to be organised by, among others, María Teresa León and José Bergamín in the summer of 1937 in Spain.<sup>206</sup> Bergamín as founder of the Alianza was a relatively uncontroversial figure within the Spanish left at the time, and surrounded himself with a wide variety of other leftists, some of curious past signatures. María Theresia León, for one, was the most prolific feminist writer of Spain in the early 20th century. She rose to fame in the 1920s under the pseudonym 'Isabela Inghirami', after a character in a novel by the renowned and notorious fascist/futurist writer Gabriele D'Annunzio. In 1932 she travelled through Europe (visiting the Netherlands in 1932), befriending Malraux, and raising funds for the Asturias Miners' Strike in 1934. During the Spanish Civil War she served as the secretary of the Alianza.<sup>207</sup> It is somewhat remarkable that Last was so very positive about her, given the fact that she held authoritarian views, and was among the group of intellectuals that attacked Last at the conference.

Upon arrival back in Spain, Last is confronted with the saddening news that during January the 'Sargento Vazquez' and its contiguous companies – including 'his' beloved 4th company – have been spread out over several new basic manoeuvre units of the Republican Army. Instead of moving out as a battalion and conducting tactical actions of their own accord, the companies have now been assigned to the newly standardized 'brigada mixta' or mixed brigades

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<sup>202</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 29 December 1936 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 37-39

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 28 January 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 58-60

<sup>206</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 21 January 1937, in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 40

<sup>207</sup> Tabea Alexa Linhard, *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005)

of the Republican Army.<sup>208</sup> As a lieutenant he was allowed to remain with the 4th company as it became part of the 39<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade. The brigade was led by a military doctor-turned-commander by the name of Miguel Palacios Martínez, an anarchist unattached to a political party who had previously commanded the Columna Palacios during the early days of the Nationalist offensive against Madrid. It is notable that the political commissar of the 39<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade was a syndicalist, likely a CNT man.<sup>209</sup> His direct superior and company commander was an ‘unsympathetic’ communist by the name of Manolo Fernandez with the rank of captain.<sup>210</sup> Shortly after his arrival Last is directed to take up positions on the Northwest of the Casa de Campo at the Puente San Fernando.<sup>211</sup>

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1937 he wrote to his wife about the changes his unit had undergone as part of the incorporation of the militias into the Republican Army. It is apparent from his description of the company’s reaction that he as a lieutenant now spent far more time behind the front than in the trenches. They nevertheless did still seem to greatly like him, not in the least because he spoke relatively fluent Spanish, and was able to alphabetise those unable to read and write in his spare time.<sup>212</sup> Throughout the last week of January and the first two weeks of February Last was too busy to write either Gide or his wife. On February 16 he sent his wife the poem ‘*Aan een gevallen makker*’ (‘to a fallen comrade’) which he wrote the week before in or near El Pardo.<sup>213</sup> This poem was bleak in tone, and based off a Spanish one of a similar tone from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that lamented the decay of civilization and morality in times of war.<sup>214</sup> The fighting in the trenches near Las Rosas and El Pardo, on the North-western edge of Madrid, continued throughout late February and most of March without producing any meaningful changes to the overall progress of the war.<sup>215</sup> On March 5 of 1937 the PCE held its first wartime congress, and made several declarations that would affect Last in his situation. The first declaration stipulated that the party committed itself to ‘democracy’ and understood this to be against Trotskyism and surprisingly also against revolutionary action.<sup>216</sup>

Last’s letter on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1937 to his wife displays much of the sullenness we are familiar with from the letters and poems of the Western Front in the First World War.<sup>217</sup> The only glimmer of optimism in the letter emerges with the discussion of the defeat of the Italian Corpo Truppe Volontarie (‘Corps of Volunteer Troops’, the Italian expeditionary force in Spain; CTV) at the battle of Guadalajara in mid-March; Last described with glee that “De prachtig uitgeruste,

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<sup>208</sup> Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 73-76, 78-79. Another meaningful casualty of the reorganisations was the Fifth Regiment; it is disbanded in January 1937, with its contiguous units being spread out over the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigades.

<sup>209</sup> Carlos Engel. *Historia de las Brigadas Mixtas del Ejército Popular de la República*. (Madrid, Almena, 1999), pp. 49-50. See also Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 346 (Appendix 4)

<sup>210</sup> Gillese, “De Tijd der Idealisten”, p. 91

<sup>211</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 28 January 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 58-60

<sup>212</sup> His public popularity with the troops in combination with his foreign exposure seems to have underpinned the baseline suspicion that especially *Capitán* Fernandez (and likely the PCE) held of Last.

<sup>213</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 28 January 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 61

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, p. 208-222. On the 21st of February 1937 the League of Nations moreover instated a ban on foreign volunteers joining the conflict, be they state-sent or of individual conviction. From this point on the steady flow of foreign recruits slows, even though trafficking across the French border and the Nationalist ports remained an object of frustration for both the Nationalists and the Republicans.

<sup>216</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 253-262

<sup>217</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 21 March 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 62-64

allernmodernste troepen van Mussolini zijn door een handjevol eenvoudige Spaanse arbeiders verslagen. Madrid is geen Addis Abeba”, and that the “De Romeinse roofgier elders zijn slachtoffers zal moeten zoeken”.<sup>218</sup> Early April 1937 is marred by the growing divide between the PCE with its allies and the CNT-FAI and its ally, the POUM. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April the CNT releases a declaration that stipulates that the revolution – social and political – must go on, as it is the strongest bulwark in the struggle against fascism.<sup>219</sup> On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April the PCE concludes a political pact with the PSOE, effectively absorbing them, to the frustration and suspicion of the CNT.<sup>220</sup> By the 16<sup>th</sup> of April this pact bore its first fruit as the PCE – under heavy pressure from the Soviets – limited the appointment of political commissars to individuals vetted and cleared by that same PCE.<sup>221</sup> It is unclear whether this immediately affected the political commissar of the 39<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade, but it is likely that his post would be taken by a PCE-friendly individual by early May. A week later, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, the PCE-controlled government abolished the soldier-councils (‘juntas de defensa’) that were up until that point responsible for the defence of Madrid with its militia units; instead the high command of the Republican Army would now lead defensive efforts.<sup>222</sup> It is around this time in late April that Last sent his next ‘letter’ – undated – to his wife in Amsterdam. The contents of the letter were in fact a short story titled ‘los chicquetillos’ [sic] or ‘the chickpeas’ which is a Spanish vernacular term for youngsters, and incorrectly spelled due to his initial education in the working-class dialect.<sup>223</sup> It is interesting that Last should misspell this, as it is reminiscent of his use of regional dialects in *Zuyderzee*, and contrasts starkly with the fact that he is teaching men in his company basic literacy skills. The story itself concerned the very young conscripts of that were at that time being integrated into the 39<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade; Last was simultaneously happy to help these 16- and 17-year olds adapt to military life, but also bemoaned the fact their youth would soon be spent.<sup>224</sup> In it he detailed his time in February and March at the Las Rosas and El Pardo fronts with the 4<sup>th</sup> company. Of some note is his description of the capture and redistribution of substantial amounts of Italian equipment in the wake of the battle of Guadalajara, and his ongoing efforts to teach individuals in his company basic literacy skills.<sup>225</sup>

In early May he secured a promotion to Capitán (Captain) at the Las Rosas front. Concurrently, a violent upheaval erupts in Barcelona on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. As the Catalan regional government attempted to retake control of vital installations, including the telephone exchange, the CNT, FAI, UGT, and POUM refused to give them up. From the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> of May running battles between these parties and communist-controlled militias as well as government troops engulf Barcelona in violence.<sup>226</sup> By the end of the fighting – and a hard fought government victory – some 500 dead and 1500 wounded were recorded, though the ensuing wave of reprisals and

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<sup>218</sup> Lit.: “The beautifully equipped, state-of-the-art troops of Mussolini have been defeated by a handful of simple Spanish workers. Madrid is not Addis Ababa” and “The Roman carrion vulture should look elsewhere for its victims”. Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 21 March 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 62-64.

<sup>219</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 253-262.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 253-262.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 83

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 28 March 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 69-75

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.



denunciations is likely to have added significantly and in unrecorded manner to those numbers.<sup>227</sup> In the Republic as a whole the PCE and its Soviet advisors intensified and expanded their efforts to root out ‘Trotskyists’ and ‘traitors’, focussing primarily on associates to the parties involved in the Barcelona May Days. Members of the CNT-FAI, POUM, and UGT from this point on were considered suspect, and were targeted heavily by security services. The result of these efforts was a growing wave of political denunciations and the wanton marking of individuals as ‘undesirable’, ‘Trotskyist’, or otherwise threatening to the Soviet-sponsored PCE dominance in Republican politics.<sup>228</sup> Last, still at the front near Las Rosas, initially did not notice much of this upheaval, and on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May writes to André Gide – inspired by Bergamín – to express his fears and his discomfort about the possible effects of Gide’s forthcoming publication of *Retouches a mon retour de l’U.R.S.S.*<sup>229</sup> Last argued that he would not have gone to Spain had he known of the content of *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.*, and fears that *Retouches a mon retour de l’U.S.S.R.* will only aggravate the damage the its predecessor did for his political position among the intellectuals of the Alianza. Particularly the statement that he would not have gone to Spain if he had known the contents of Gide’s travelogue is striking, as it is a veiled admission of his being in danger, and suggests – in my view persuasively – that he was aware of the GPU on his tail. Last stated that Gide’s anti-revolutionary writing stands in stark contrast with what he had seen in Spain since becoming a fighter there.<sup>230</sup> In an interesting prioritising of loyalties, Last continues his letter by expressing his unhappiness with the fact that Trotsky (exiled in Mexico) had attacked their mutual friend Malraux and his ‘efforts in service of the Republic’ which primarily consisted of propaganda-writing for the PSOE and PCE.<sup>231</sup> The overall impression that the correspondence of May 1937 gives is rather confusing. Compared to his letters before May 1937, those thereafter are written in a far more plain style, with fewer emotional statements in them, and often resorting to wooden propagandistic language which he did not tend to employ in his personal letters at all before that time. This stylistic change must be considered a form of self-censorship employed by Last, even though it is unclear whether he elected to do so himself or if external forces compelled him to do so. Based on Gide’s reactions to his letters after 1937 there are few indications that Last succeeded in making him understand his situation through these veiled messages, which was likely the cause for mutual consternation.

For the remainder of May Last was held up at the frontline North of Madrid, only writing his next letter in the middle of June.<sup>232</sup> Around this time it seems that the political scrutiny of Last mounted, and that authorities are much more likely to have intercepted telegrams and letters of his to Gide and his wife that made him a suspected ‘Trotskyist agent’, though it is difficult to properly evidence this. On June 15<sup>th</sup> Last wrote a long letter in which he recounted his time at the Las Rosas front the previous months, taking into consideration the many brushes with death he had there. The overall tendency of this particular letter is almost melancholic and seems to reflect

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<sup>227</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 263-273 and Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 216-229. Beevor names no exact number of casualties but does put forward that after the event some 20 000 individuals were imprisoned, of which 94% had their sentence commuted or thrown out. Payne puts forward the conservatively low number of 400 casualties, undercutting Hugh Thomas’s 1960s estimate of 500-1500 casualties during the fighting.

<sup>228</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 263-273

<sup>229</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 8 May 1937, in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 40

<sup>230</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 8 May 1937, in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 40.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 15 June 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 91-99

a return to his isolated disposition of eight to nine months before, when he left to fight in Spain.<sup>233</sup> By July 1937 several consequent events shook up Last's already complicated political life in Spain. The first event of note is Last's partly voluntary, part forcible replacement as company commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> company.<sup>234</sup> Though he was revered by the file of the company, the opinion of him among the ranking officers was negative and suspicious. Particularly battalion commander Capitán Manolo Fernandez strongly disliked Last, and with the possible removal of the CNT commissar (as a result of the Barcelona May Days) actively worked to remove Last from his unit, which he achieved by late June.<sup>235</sup> According to Last's letter on his removal from command, Capitán Fernandez claimed that foreigners must – 'by government order'—all be concentrated in the International Brigades and would therefore be removed from regular Spanish-speaking mixed brigades, even though the polyglot Last's fluency in Spanish allowed him to comfortably teach others literacy skills in it.<sup>236</sup> Although there is a measure of truth to this reasoning it seems to be mostly politically charged suspicion that removed Last to Albacete and the International Brigades.<sup>237</sup> Last was nonetheless heartbroken to leave his comrades with which he had fought from October 1936 onwards, and in his letter emotionally claims that he said goodbye to the Fifth Regiment; in actuality the Fifth Regiment had officially been disbanded in January 1937.<sup>238</sup>

Capitán Fernandez's dislike and political suspicion of Last must be viewed as a strong example of the political reckoning between the forces of Moscow-communism and other leftist organisations that manifested itself in the summer of 1937. For Last however this reckoning had only begun with his formal removal to the International Brigades. The Second International Congress of for the Defence of Culture he had enthusiastically written to Gide about on his trip back to Spain in January was scheduled to take place from 4, 5 (Valencia), 6 July (Madrid) and 17 July (Paris) 1937.<sup>239</sup> André Gide was a notable absent invitee to the congress, yet was effectively the main subject of it given his disavowal of the Soviet Union, even though the official headline of the congress concerned the attitude of writers and intellectuals to the Spanish Civil War.<sup>240</sup> Bergamín, another of Last's idols, headed the congress for its second edition, and was among the first to attack Gide's *Retouches* and *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* for its counterrevolutionary content; he was followed by many others, and by the end of the Spanish dates of the congress Gide had effectively been completely disavowed by the increasingly Moscow-oriented leftist writers of the Alianza, save Jef Last.<sup>241</sup> At the congress constant pressure by fellow intellectuals was exerted on Last to similarly disavow Gide and his work, which he categorically refused, based on the fact that he had merely read parts of the manuscript of *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* (which was factually true based on the *Correspondance*), and that he had not been able to read *Retouches* at all, which was also factual.<sup>242</sup> Although Last was not a figure within the Alianza on the first rank, he was considered to be an important intellectual representative of the Netherlands in Spain in the absence of any other great intellectual figures. The fact that he had read the key passages of *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* and agreed

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<sup>233</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, 15 June 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 91-99.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 49

<sup>239</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 183-184

<sup>240</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 10 July 1937 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 41

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, see also Kruizinga, "The First Resisters", pp. 6-7; and Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 183-184.

<sup>242</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 183-184

with the ills of the Soviet Union as Gide presented them he kept wisely secret.<sup>243</sup> These reasons were not enough to exculpate him, and by the end of the congress, according to Last in a letter to Gide, only Malraux supported him in his position.<sup>244</sup> Last finished his participation by delivering a speech on the nature and necessity of criticism in Marxist-Leninist thought, which in his particular context only aggravated the rejection of his support for Gide by his peers.<sup>245</sup>

Cautioned by his experiences at the congress, and having likely been made attentive to the fact that his communications were being monitored, Last wrote a letter to Gide on 10 July, which echoed the letter of the 8<sup>th</sup> of May; in it he again attempted to carefully criticise the Soviet Union by wrapping this message in superficial praise.<sup>246</sup> Gide eventually used elements of this in the foreword to his reprinted poetry bundle *Nouvelles Nourritures* ('New Foods') of 1935 (first print) 1938 (third print).<sup>247</sup> Last on the advice of Malraux made contact with Ludwig Renn, a politically subversive acquaintance from the Alianza and the commander of the XI International Brigade. Since it was impossible for him to return to the Sargento Vazquez and he wished to remain part of the struggle, Renn provided him with a position as a prospective company commander in the newly founded Dutch/Flemish battalion (the 'Zeven Provinciën' battalion) of the brigade.<sup>248</sup>

Throughout mid-July Last's high spirits returned but were quashed again at the end of the month. The Negrín-government on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July forbade public criticism of the Soviet Union.<sup>249</sup> Last was hence put in an untenable position vis-a-vis the CPN by publications in the communist paper *Het Volk* of 23 and 30 July 1937 that condemned his support for Gide at the writer's congress at the beginning of the month.<sup>250</sup> For this reason he was summoned to Madrid sometime on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, to explain his actions and position to the Dutch political commissar of the Brigade, Albert Potze. Together with his secretary Tim Timmerman, Potze wrote up a testimony delivered by Last, which would be published in *Het Volksdagblad* on 8 October 1937.<sup>251</sup> In the testimony Last explained how and why he was not a Trotskyist, and why he had supported Gide throughout the congress. This publication would prove to be a preface to Nico Rost's denunciatory pamphlet of 1938, and foremostly attacked Last for his alleged Trotskyist political views, as well as proposed that he had been corrupted by the 'pederast' Gide.

The testimony – and especially the accusations of Trotskyism – sealed his fate at the XI International Brigade, and removed him from his function there by mid-August, prompting him to return to the 39<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade and the 4<sup>th</sup> company to continue participating in the war effort there.<sup>252</sup> Though he was seemingly successful in convincing the divisional- and brigade staff of his political reliability, battalion commander Capitán Fernandez remained adamant in his hostility to Last.<sup>253</sup> Though the precise circumstances, time, and location are unverifiable per primary source material but Last recalls it in *Mijn Vriend André Gide*, he was court-martialled on the order of

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<sup>243</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 183-184.

<sup>244</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 10 July 1937 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 41

<sup>245</sup> Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last", pp. 183-184 and Wester. "De autobiografieën van Jef Last", pp. 164-170.

<sup>246</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 10 July 1937 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p.41-43

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Kruizinga, "The First Resisters", pp. 6-7

<sup>249</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 293-296

<sup>250</sup> Gillese, "De Tijd der Idealisten", pp. 93-95

<sup>251</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, 8 October 1937, and Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, pp. 134-152

<sup>252</sup> Kruizinga, "The First Resisters", pp. 6-7

<sup>253</sup> Letter from Jef Last to Ida ter Haar, ca. 15 July 1937 in Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp.102-103

Fernandez in late August, after failing to follow his orders.<sup>254</sup> Manolo according to Last's recollections in *Mijn Vriend André Gide* "... rukte mij de distinctieven van mijn uniform, zeggend dat ik de volgende morgen gefusilleerd zou worden".<sup>255</sup> At the behest of Malraux, Gide, and also Edo Fimmen (an old acquaintance of Last from his LAI-days, and head of the International Transport Worker's Federation; ITF) the court-martial acquitted Last of the charges put forward by Manolo, but decided that he was not politically fit to serve in a frontline unit.<sup>256</sup> Consequently, his rank of Capitán was upheld and he was sent to the town of Madrigueras, near Albacete, where he was to serve as an instruction officer.<sup>257</sup>

After his close brush with the military authorities it seems that Last was content to be an instruction officer, which gave him more time to write and correspond again after the hectic July he had.<sup>258</sup> In Madrigueras he experienced a productive time as a writer, penning several essays "La cosecha es sagrada – De oogst is Heilig" and "Pajaro Negro", a short story ("Don Quijotte in de loopgraaf"), and a pamphlet about Dutch volunteers in Spain ("Jef Last over de Hollanders in Spanje"), which were all published and distributed in the Netherlands through the efforts of his wife and were all Dutch-language works.<sup>259</sup> The essay "La cosecha es sagrada – De oogst is Heilig" was a celebration of the new socialist way in which the Spaniards engaged in the harvest festivities. "Pajaro Negro" was a bleak short story about daily life in the trenches and the random killing of a little domesticated black crow in a platoon. "Don Quijotte in de loopgraaf" similarly detailed trench life and blended in themes of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* regarding the purpose and use of conducting such types of warfare for the Republic. "Jef Last over de Hollanders in Spanje" was a propaganda piece about the strange reconciliation of enemies of yore; Last evoked popular Dutch nationalist imagery of the 80 Years' War juxtaposing the leftists which he equated with the 'watergeuzen' and the nationalists which he equated with the Duke of Alva and his notorious Council of Troubles.<sup>260</sup>

Throughout September Last was closely scrutinised by the political commissars, even though the short stories and essays he had sent to the Netherlands in July were well received after their publication through Uitgeverij Contact. All the while, the PCE had expanded its relentless campaign against 'undesired political elements' since the official complete merger of it with all other still legal socialist parties on 17 August 1937.<sup>261</sup> On 3 October Last was again summoned by military legal authorities, this time to Albacete, to provide testimony to a court martial as well as commissar Janrik van Gilse (Potze's replacement, as he had moved to the party office in Paris) and secretary Tim Timmerman. The court-martial accused him of having contributed to the preparations of the POUM for the Barcelona May Days of that year and claimed to have evidence of his insurgent activities throughout January of 1937.<sup>262</sup> Having saved his flight- and train tickets

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<sup>254</sup> Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, p. 150

<sup>255</sup> Lit.: "... he ripped the rank insignia from my uniform while telling me I would be shot the next morning". Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, p. 150.

<sup>256</sup> Hyslop, "German seafarers, anti-fascism and the anti-Stalinist left", pp. 499-520

<sup>257</sup> Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, pp. 149-150

<sup>258</sup> Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 115-120

<sup>259</sup> Amsterdam, Contact, 1937. This he wrote in response to the decree that all Dutch nationals that served with the Republicans would lose their Dutch citizenship, rendering them stateless. See Kruizinga, "The First Resisters", pp. 6-7 and Rensen, "El Capitán Jef Last" pp. 183-184

<sup>260</sup> Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 69-74, 81-83, 84-90, and 103-114 respectively.

<sup>261</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 293-296

<sup>262</sup> Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, pp. 149-150

of his visit to Gide in Paris and to his wife in Amsterdam he managed to provide enough evidence to hold the court in contempt by virtue of his absence from the country, and with further intercession of Malraux and Fimmen obtained an acquittal.<sup>263</sup> It is unclear whether this acquittal led him to continue working as an instruction officer, or whether he was merely rendered ‘non-active’ and was left free of military duties. It is likely that after his acquittal he engaged in journalistic work, and left for the Dutch hospital – attached to the Zeven Provinciën Battalion – at Villanueva de la Jara, judging by the upbeat and everyday content of the last few chapters of *De Spaanse Tragedie* – only published in the edited version in 1938 – and the seeming absence of any lasting injury or sickness.<sup>264</sup>

Between 17 October and 7 November Last attempts to obtain papers from the Ministry of Defence to go on a propaganda tour of Scandinavia, as he felt increasingly useless in Spain, having been barred to enter combat units, and having been disavowed by the leading intellectuals in Madrid.<sup>265</sup> It is difficult to discern why precisely Scandinavia became Last’s destination, and whether or not it was of his own choice. The Republic had an interest in securing weapons shipments and resources to prosecute the war, but all Scandinavian states had more or less acceded to non-interventionism, even though a popular movement in support of the Republic remained strong. Recruitment of foreign volunteers does not seem to have been an objective of the propaganda tour, since manpower was useless in the face of constant equipment shortages and political reliability issues. It is my suspicion that Last, having struck a deal with Edo Fimmen of the International Transport Worker’s Federation, had already in the summer of 1937 decided to continue his antifascist efforts elsewhere. Fimmen’s ITF had by then already started observing and engaging with German sailors, hoping to ‘turn’ them and make anti-Nazi agents of them in the event of war breaking out.<sup>266</sup> On 7 November Last finally left Albacete for Paris, where he stayed at the Rue Vaneau until the end of the month before embarking for Norway. He would not return to Spain until 1961.<sup>267</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks on Chapter 2 – Cementing the disaffection**

The fourth and final journey to the Soviet Union in July and August 1936 that Last made, this time together with Gide, virtually eliminated all hope he had left for it being a sort of promised land. Last felt strongly that life as whole in Stalin’s Soviet Union had become a country with a communist bourgeoisie; the petty, conformist, attitudes to art and sex he had experienced in capitalist society had effectively resurfaced, if painted with a red veneer. This filled Last with dread and challenged his utopian hopes for a better world to the point of a crisis of faith. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 while he was in the Soviet Union opened up a new avenue of participating in the fight against fascism for Last; though his fellow travelers attempted to dissuade him from pursuing the in their eyes militarist path to a socialist utopia, he decided to do so anyway and succeeded in enlisting Gide’s help to travel to Spain of his own accord.

It is greatly significant that Last managed to reach the Republic without the backing or intercession of the CPH or Comintern, and this fact gave him free reign in choosing how exactly

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<sup>263</sup> Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>264</sup> Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, p. 121-127

<sup>265</sup> Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, pp. 150-152

<sup>266</sup> Hyslop, “German seafarers, anti-fascism and the anti-Stalinist left”, pp. 499-520

<sup>267</sup> Last, *De Spaanse Tragedie*, pp. 133-198

he wanted to do his part in the fight against Franco's Nationalists. The consequent choice he made in joining the Columan Sargento Vazquez was momentous in the sense that he willingly and knowingly enlisted in a unit that contained mostly syndicalists, anarchists, and anti-Stalinist leftists. On the one hand this choice of the Columna Sargento Vazquez over the International Brigades or other communist-run outfits brought him into contact with like-minded intellectuals, including the humanitarian socialist Bergamín, whose views on the practices of socialism inspired Last. On the other hand this choice for a non-communist unit came to haunt him following the Barcelona May Days of 1937, and his enlistment in the Columan Sargento Vazquez made him a *de facto* suspect of political disloyalty. The combination of his absence from the front in January, and Gide's publication of the travelogue of the disastrous Soviet journey the summer before in Spring 1937 put him in an impossible position regarding his political position and his conscience. Last attempted to dissuade Gide from publishing the follow-up to his initial travelogue in May 1937, and sought to convince him of the deep necessity of supporting the Soviet Union, even if it was only for strategic reasons and not moral or ideological ones.

The authorities accused him of being a Trotskyist and of aiding the POUM's preparations for the Barcelona May Days in July 1937. In practice Last superiors, including Capitán Fernandez, were using political denunciation as a tool to remove him from sensitive positions on the front. By exploiting Last's loyalty to Gide, his bisexuality, and his previous criticisms of the Soviet Union from between 1932 and 1935, the communist leadership as well as his intellectual peers – notably including Bergamín – isolated Last. His deep fear of this isolation struck Last extremely hard, but did not completely break him. In fact, it motivated him to give his all and prove to those in Spain and beyond that he was a true support of the socialist cause, and ardent antifascist. Testament of this was his extensive propaganda-writing and the unsanctioned return to the front to the Sargento Vazquez which ended quickly when he was court-martialled and relegated to support duties behind the front. Though Edo Fimmen of the antifascist trade union ITF interceded on his behalf and saved him from execution, Last did not see a way for him to remain in Spain any longer and participate in the fight against fascism there. Instead, probably having planned this with Fimmen while still in Spain, he had elected to help set up an intelligence network among German merchant mariners to see if the leftists among them would rally to the antifascist cause, come the outbreak of the Second World War.

## **Chapter 3 – Antifascist, Stateless and Isolated | 1938-39**

### **February-June 1938 – Teruel and emigration plans**

On 22 February 1938 the city of Teruel, on the Aragonese front in Spain, fell into the hands of Nationalist forces after the battle for it had raged on since mid-December 1937.<sup>268</sup> Although initially strategically insignificant for both sides, taking Teruel became a necessity for the Republicans as well as the Nationalists after they had committed to the battle. For the Republicans a victory of Teruel would have cemented the reputation of the reorganised Army – without the assistance of the International Brigades.<sup>269</sup> For the Nationalists holding on to Teruel would effectively secure a springboard for an offensive against Spain's Mediterranean coast, which was to cut in half the Republic's territory and isolated Catalonia.<sup>270</sup> The Nationalists won a hard-fought victory, which made it clear that they had developed material superiority to the Republic with the help of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and their fewer losses in manpower sapped the manpower of the Republic to a point of no return.<sup>271</sup> The fall of Teruel marked the turning point of the war, and destroyed the resolve of the Republic, as well as that of many of its supporters, including Last.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1938 many newspapers in the Netherlands – given his status as a decently well-read writer – published a brief communiqué which stated simply that Jef Last had renounced his membership of the CPN “naar aanleiding van de nieuwe processen in de Sovjet-Rusland en in verband met den onvoldoenden Russischen steun aan de Spaansche Republiek”.<sup>272</sup> The CPN-secretariat concurrently published its reaction to Last's renunciation in *Het Volksdagblad* of the same day accusing him of desertion, conspiracy with the POUM, and espionage for Franco's forces.<sup>273</sup> These accusations are hardly surprising and mirror similar denunciations in European communist newspapers of foreigners in Spain that fell afoul of the authorities, including George Orwell.<sup>274</sup> What is more surprising about the accusations is that the CPN-secretariat claims that he had not formally been a member of the CPN since before his departure to Spain in September 1936: “Zijn ‘bedanken’ voor de Communistische Partij Nederland, waarvan hij sinds het vertrek naar het buitenland geen lid meer was ... is dus niets anders dan laffe desertie”.<sup>275</sup> Though this claim is mentioned in a single sentence with a blatant accusation of desertion, it is surprising to see that the CPN – apparently in step with the Dutch government – had come to view Last as having lost his Dutch citizenship as well as his party membership upon joining the militia in Spain.<sup>276</sup> The content and style of this article make it completely unreliable for facts, but the claim it makes is nevertheless interesting, and raises further questions as to his political standpoint and association.

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<sup>268</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, pp. 313-328

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> The *Friesch Dagblad*, *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, *De Maasbode*, *Delftsche Courant*, *Arnhemsche Courant*, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, *Nieuwe Apeldoornsche Courant*, *Nieuwe Venlosche Courant*, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, *Utrechts Volksblad*, *De Telegraaf* and at least another dozen local and national newspapers published this on 2 March 1938. The *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* and the *Indische Courant* published it a day later.

<sup>273</sup> “Verklaring van ‘t [sic] Secretariaat der C.P.N. over Jef last” *Het Volksdagblad*, 2 March 1938.

<sup>274</sup> Peter Davison (ed.), *Orwell in Spain – The Full Text of ‘Homage to Catalonia’ with Associated Articles, Reviews and letters from the ‘Complete Works of George Orwell’* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 219-224

<sup>275</sup> “Verklaring van ‘t [sic] Secretariaat der C.P.N. over Jef last” *Het Volksdagblad*, 2 March 1938

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

The week thereafter the news of Last's renunciation of the CPN and their condemnation had not reached Gide yet. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1938 he wrote Last, stating that he was « heureux de savoir que [il a] pris une position nette et franche – fût-ce pour t'exposer a quelques injures, m'est avis que tu étais percé a jour et qu'il ne servait a rien de chercher a ruser ». <sup>277</sup> From this it is clear that Gide partially influenced Last towards making this decision, and it also displays a definite lack of understanding for its most serious consequences. Last replied to Gide only on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, and related to him the immediate condemnation he had suffered upon returning from the Scandinavian propaganda tour that had consequently been cancelled. <sup>278</sup> Last may have returned from this tour, but it is completely unclear where to; his letters to Gide from late March 1938 are certainly correctly dated, but some are marked 'Amsterdam', which implies he somehow – without papers or intercession by third parties – made it into the Netherlands. <sup>279</sup> From at least the 21<sup>st</sup> of March through to the 6<sup>th</sup> of April he remained in the country, before travelling to his house in Antwerp, where he fell into a depression, in no small part due to having had to formally separate from his wife. <sup>280</sup> The loss of his Dutch citizenship caused tremendous legal issues for himself and Ida ter Haar. For Last himself it meant he was unable to obtain a passport or travel papers, which in turn barred him from obtaining work visa, and effectively rendered him a charity case. For Ida ter Haar – even though she retained her citizenship – it meant that she was barred from legally working anywhere in the Netherlands, which took away her already shambolic income from publications and commissions. It moreover forced her to stop working with children for or through schools, which had been her true passion and beloved vocation for more than two decades by 1938. In order for her to have any options to take care of their three children and continue her working in children's theatre she and Last decided to divorce. <sup>281</sup>

In Antwerp the dejected Last is without income, as he previously received pay through Comintern organisation responsible for the propaganda tours and his publications. As such, he hoped to secure an income through the publication of his novel *Onvoldoende voor de liefde* ('A failing grade for love'), and contacted Gide to ask him for funds until he had received his commission later that Spring. Last also mentioned in passing that he strongly considered moving to Mexico given the fact that he did not like Scandinavia much, and increasingly started to demand of Gide that he spoke to the Mexican consul in Paris in order to provide him with travel documents there. <sup>282</sup> Gide, by contrast, disagreed with Last's mindset on Mexico and estimated that Last would quickly fall to political intrigue there, which, considering his political disposition at the time, could cost him his life. <sup>283</sup> Instead Gide suggested that Last take up residence in Denmark for a time, to weather the storm there since he possessed a small property in Copenhagen. <sup>284</sup> By the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1938 Last still lived in Antwerp, and still had his heart set on emigrating to Mexico. <sup>285</sup> At this point in time Gide's semi-estranged wife had entered the final phase of a long sickbed from cancer to the spinal cord, and Last wrote him to convey his condolences as well as update him on his own

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<sup>277</sup> Letter from André Gide to Jef Last, 10 March 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 47

<sup>278</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 21 March 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 48

<sup>279</sup> Letters from Jef Last to André Gide, 6 and 31 March 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 48-49

<sup>280</sup> Jef Last. *Een Antwoord op Het Geval Jef Last*. (Amsterdam: De Ploeger, 1938), pp. 1-4

<sup>281</sup> Ibid. They would remarry when Last recovered his Dutch citizenship after the Second World War.

<sup>282</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 31 March 1938, in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 48-49

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Letter from André Gide to Jef Last, 3 April 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 49.

<sup>285</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 1 May 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 51



chagrin on Labour Day.<sup>286</sup> On 5 May he wrote another letter, this time to warn Gide of the slanderous pamphlet that was to come out in July, stating that Gide was likely to also be mentioned and attacked in it.<sup>287</sup> Last knew that his former comrade Nico Rost was working on the pamphlet, although it is unclear from this letter exchange how exactly he was made attentive to this.<sup>288</sup>

Shortly after the letter of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, Last attempted to travel to Amsterdam once again, probably to stay with his wife. This time his attempts resulted in his imprisonment by the Marechaussee (Dutch military police) at their barracks in Zundert, Brabant.<sup>289</sup> For nearly two weeks he remained behind bars before being ejected from the Netherlands across the Belgian border, which allowed him to return to Antwerp. During his imprisonment he had written to Gide that he was unable to accept his invitation to stay in Denmark together.<sup>290</sup> In the same letter he expressed his sadness that he was unable to show Gide his country, and hoped to be in a position to do so after the legal charges – i.e. having illegally crossed the Dutch border as a ‘foreign undesirable’ – have been dropped or otherwise resolved.<sup>291</sup> From the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May through to the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1938 Last sent Gide no less than six letters inviting him to the Netherlands, which he again had managed to enter halfway June.<sup>292</sup> Last put himself up on the heath near Epe, where he awaited Gide’s reply and arrival. As Gide ignored him, Last gave up hope that he would visit him, and in his miserly humour requests that Gide inform him of the possibilities for emigration to an undefined country South America if Mexico was unacceptable.<sup>293</sup> He signed his letters with a downcast and defeated « ton ami prisonnier ».<sup>294</sup>

## July 1938- late 1939 – Omens of the Second World War

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1938 the pamphlet *Het Geval Jef Last – Over Fascisme en Trotskisme* by Nico Rost is published by Uitgeverij Pegasus in Amsterdam. It is a 39-page attack on Last’s person, his political activities in Spain, and his relationship with Gide. The accusations made by Rost echoed those of the CPN-secretariat and came in eight chapters.<sup>295</sup> The first chapter was an attempt at justifying the publication of the pamphlet, and listed several passages from Last’s own work – especially his 1935 article in *Fundament* and his essays from July 1937 – which were consequently used to illustrate his ‘fascist’ activities and his Trotskyist, anti-Stalinist practicing of communist thought.<sup>296</sup> The second chapter is focused on Gide’s political thought, of which Rost claims it was instrumental in persuading Last to his position on homosexuality and the legality thereof in the Soviet Union.<sup>297</sup> Rost went on to state that “deze felle aanval op de Sowjet-Unie, waartoe Last zich door zijn opvattingen over de homosexualiteit liet verleiden” was primarily borne of Last’s lack of faith in the ability of the Soviet Union to accept criticism.<sup>298</sup> From this point in the pamphlet

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<sup>286</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 1 May 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 51

<sup>287</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 5 May 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 52

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 19 May 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 52

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Wester. “Een spel der misverstanden”, pp. 80-85

<sup>293</sup> Letter from Jef last to André Gide, 28 June 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 55

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Nico Rost. *Het Geval Jef Last; Over Fascisme en Trotskisme* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Pegasus, 1938)

<sup>296</sup> Rost, *Het Geval Jef Last*, pp. 3-9

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 12

onwards, Rost relished in using homosexuality as a key explanatory factor in Last's actions and writing. He went as far as to compare Last's role – as a homosexual – in the militia movement in Spain to the role of Ernst Röhm in the SA, and the roles of other “paederasts” in the SS. In the third chapter Rost accuses Last of having forgotten his role as communist intellectual during his literary career and calls him “onrijp” as a writer.<sup>299</sup> Concurrently Rost in a befuddling attempt at doublethink attacks Last for his harshness about the clergy, who according to Rost were apparently not always enemies of the people, and in Spain often brave allies of communism.<sup>300</sup> The fourth and fifth chapters of the pamphlet are unsurprisingly equally inaccurate and concerned Last's published correspondence from and stay in Spain the previous two years.<sup>301</sup> Rost lamented the fact that Last in his letters gave up hope for a Republican victory (which he did shortly after the rout at Getafe), and his lack of confidence in the arrivals of Soviet weapons' shipments and manpower (which did in fact not make it to the frontages Last was at). Chapters five through eight were in essence an essay on the POUM rather than a further disavowal of Last. In the wooden language of Moscow communism Rost proceeded to elaborate on the subversive and counterrevolutionary nature and activities of the POUM in the Spanish Civil War, associating Last directly with that party, apparently evidenced by his court-martials in 1937.<sup>302</sup> The final act of the pamphlet is its harshest and moreover its most voracious. In three pages Rost discussed Last's arrest at Zundert, his imprisonment, and the fact that questions were asked in parliament –by Henk Sneevliet on behalf of the RSAP.<sup>303</sup> Rost consequently argues that – since the government let him go and let him off – Last represented no danger to the old order, and that this treatment confirmed his moral turpitude by putting him in the camp of this established order.<sup>304</sup>

Last had warned Gide that the pamphlet would be published already some months prior to the event, and as a result of his knowledge thereof was able to prepare a modicum of counterarguments to its vitriolic content. This series of argumentations he bundled in a reply to Rost's pamphlet and had published in August 1938 by Uitgeverij Ploeger with the title *Het Geval Jef Last*.<sup>305</sup> Last opened his reply with a personal attack on Rost, claiming that he had been praised by him during the winter of 1937 when he was in the Netherlands on furlough, something that another critic but tacit supporter of Last in the literary world, Dr. Johan Brouwer, had clearly witnessed and discussed in an article in *De Stem* dated May 1938.<sup>306</sup> Last then proceeded to attack Rost's own political positioning, raising the matter of Rost's own Trotskyite persuasion, and expanded on his sycophantic behaviours towards himself.<sup>307</sup> To the accusation that he had been a deserter Last replied that up until the final month of his stay in Spain the leadership of the International Brigades – notably Ludwig Renn – had no issue with him; this is a cunning deflection rather than a full rebuttal, given his being court-martialled twice.<sup>308</sup>

On the accusation that he was a Trotskyist Last had more difficulty crafting a rebuttal. He argued that the *Volksdagblad* in December 1937 had declared earlier accusations of Trotskyism in

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<sup>299</sup> Rost, *Het Geval Jef Last*, pp. 17-18

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-16

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-26

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-31

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39

<sup>305</sup> Last, *Een Antwoord op het Geval Jef Last*.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; Brouwer, “Intellect en intellectversjachering” In *De Stem* 18 (1938) pp. 215-217

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9

Last were false, and raised this as key factor in his innocence.<sup>309</sup> Interestingly, in rebutting Rost's criticism regarding his stance on clerical matters, Last proceeded to state he had always emphasised the furthering of mutual understanding above all else; this statement was one of the very rare admissions of his having remained a believer.<sup>310</sup> With regard to his homosexuality, Last remained largely silent in his reply to Rost, which is surprising given the attention the latter devotes to it.<sup>311</sup> Instead, Last directed the final page of his reply against the Dutch government, rather than at the CPN. He argued that it was inhumane of the Dutch state to strip him of his citizenship, forcing him to separate from his wife and rendering both himself and Ida Ter Haar unable to work and provide in general.<sup>312</sup>

Last in early September 1938 obtained a small studio in Amsterdam, and moved his now officially bachelor household there again.<sup>313</sup> In a letter to Gide on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1938 he mentioned that – after all the injustices and suffering of the preceding months – he was somewhat happy again, especially now he had seen many of his Amsterdam friends again.<sup>314</sup> He also stated that *The Spaanse Tragedie* sold rather well, having been published in May 1938 – which was indeed the case judging by the amount of adverts for it in diverse magazines – and that it represented literary success for him, which was less close to the truth if one read the reviews of his work.<sup>315</sup> A few days later, Last wrote Gide another letter which is markedly less positive in tone about his own affairs, but thanks Gide for his efforts on part of Harry Domela – his friend and fellow Spanish Civil War veteran.<sup>316</sup> On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1938 Last sent Gide a five-page letter detailing his opinions on the outcome of the Munich Conference the day before, railing against Nazi aggression and expressing his fears that another Great War was clearly in the making.<sup>317</sup> Last's sharp political foresight emerges clearly from this letter, as he discusses France's newly isolated strategic position on the continent, and laments the uselessness of all the death and destruction in Spain now the Soviet Union had shown itself unwilling to militarily curtail Nazi ambitions in Europe.<sup>318</sup> Last and Gide would continue discussing the matter of 'Munich' in their letters until mid-October, before spending the remainder of that month and November discussing Gide's manuscripts.<sup>319</sup>

By early December 1938 Last formally declares his intentions to move to South America to Gide, who barely replies to this and instead focuses on political affairs, such as the assassination of the Nazi German ambassador to France, Von Rath, and its consequences for France.<sup>320</sup> It is of some note that neither he nor Gide discuss the assassination of Von Rath as a prelude to the Kristallnacht that followed; this indicates that their political interests remained antifascist, if a bit tone-deaf when it came to the plight of Europe's Jews. By the end of December 1938, Last for reasons only clear to him wrote Gide that he had decided against following through with his

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<sup>309</sup> Last. *Een Antwoord op het Geval Jef Last.*, p. 10

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>311</sup> Last. *Een Antwoord op het Geval Jef Last.*

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>313</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 10 September 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 56-57

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> J. Brouwer. "Last over Spanje" in *De Stem* 19 (1939) pp. 101-104

<sup>316</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 22 September 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 59

<sup>317</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 1 October 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 59-62

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 59-65

<sup>320</sup> Letter from André Gide to Jef Last, 18 December 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 75

immigration plans.<sup>321</sup> He explained to Gide in a letter in January that he had been asked to move to Oslo for an « engagement littéraire », which was the cover for his work for the ITF to which he had agreed in late 1937.<sup>322</sup> Though Last seemed to have relished working for an antifascist organisation and union again, he did not make clear who or what organisation he went to work for in Norway to Gide, and instead complained about Oslo. In his view « Oslo ... est devenue la ville la plus terrible que je connaisse, la neige s'est changée en boue, il n'y a aucune chambre de libre, aucun café, aucun hôtel, aucun bordel. La jeunesse est très belle, très saine, très provocante, raffinée a un point qu'on ne peut croire ; elle n'aspire qu'à profiter, boire, fumer, et puis faire le chantage le plus brutal que j'aie jamais vu ou subi». <sup>323</sup> This colourful ventilation of Last's Scandinavian despair was followed by a series of letters throughout mid-late January and February in which he detailed his travels across the length of Norway; instead of describing his visits to Norway's iron ports he mostly expands on Lapland and the Sami.<sup>324</sup>

Throughout March 1939, Gide and Last only send one another a few letters, as Last is in parts of the North that are largely incommunicado, or is aboard ships travelling around the Lofoten Islands, while Gide has moved to Mexico for reasons of deteriorating health.<sup>325</sup> As their communication slowed, both men wrote less and less of their personal exploits and started focusing increasingly on the more mundane things in their lives. Another compounding factor was the fact that Last, working for the ITF, needed to be careful what he told others about his work.<sup>326</sup> The 'literary engagement' he had told Gide about in fact was a cover for intelligence-gathering and provocation he did for the ITF.<sup>327</sup> As part of this work Last travelled to Norway's Northern iron harbours, seeking out German merchantmen in an attempt to see if any of their captains and crew were unsympathetic to the Nazi's. Fimmen's thinking was that those transport workers that still held leftist sympathies could be incorporated into a clandestine network run from the ITF. It was Fimmen's intention to call on this network to subvert the German war effort turned out to be as fantastic as its precedent; none of the transport workers approached by the ITF was disloyal to the Nazi's, and the clandestine network did not materialise before the war started in earnest in September 1939.<sup>328</sup> As a result of the eruption of the Second World War Last – after some difficulty with his new temporary passport – managed to return to the Netherlands, more politically isolated than ever and far-removed from his ex-wife and best friend André Gide.<sup>329</sup>

Jef Last would remain in the Netherlands throughout the Second World War, and by 1941 had become involved in the communist underground paper *De Vonk*. This paper was humanist-socialist in signature and active across the Netherlands. In 1944 he became a combat member of the Binnenlandsche Strijdkrachten ('Forces of the Interior'; the resistance army in the occupied

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<sup>321</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 28 December 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 77-78

<sup>322</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 18 January 1938 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p.81

<sup>323</sup> Lit.: "Oslo ... has become the worst city that I know, the snow has turned into mud, there are no free rooms, no cafes, no hotels, no brothels. The youth is very beautiful, very healthy, very provocative, refined to an unbelievable point; [yet] it only aspires to [hedonistically] enjoy, drink, smoke, and then blackmail in the most brutal [way(s)] I've ever seen or undergone". Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 1 February 1939 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 81-82

<sup>324</sup> Greshoff, *Correspondance*, pp. 82-88

<sup>325</sup> Letter from André Gide to Jef Last, 17 June 1939 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 95

<sup>326</sup> Hyslop, "German seafarers, anti-fascism and the anti-Stalinist left", pp. 499-520

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> Letter from Jef Last to André Gide, 25 September 1939 in Greshoff, *Correspondance*, p. 96

Netherlands) and participated in ambushes and fighting in the vicinity of Ommen during the closing stages of the war in the Netherlands. After the war he – even though he was still technically stateless – worked as government official processing returning POW's and political prisoners. In 1946 he was one of the founding members of the so-called 'Shakespeare Club' which is a predecessor to the Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum or 'COC', the main organisation in the Netherlands active in the advocacy for and emancipation of LGBTI individuals. By 1947 he had regained his Dutch citizenship as a result of his resistance activities, unlike many of his fellow veterans of the Spanish Civil War, and remarried Ida Ter Haar. In 1950 he went to Bali, Indonesia on the invitation of Mohammad Hatta, and taught English at a high school there until 1953. Gide's death in 1951 hit him hard, but also inspired him to travel extensively. From 1954 through to 1965 he would rarely be in the Netherlands as he visited Japan and China, Spain, and Morocco. As advancing age started putting a physical strain on his travelling, he returned to the Netherlands in 1966 and started working on his memoirs, elements of which he published in *Mijn Vriend André Gide*. All the while he also remained recalcitrant as ever, arguing that neither the PvdA, nor the PSP were worth voting for if one was to vote against capitalism.<sup>330</sup> The overall memoirs were never completed, and he left them to his three daughters when he died in 1972.

### **Concluding Remarks on Chapter 3 – Final Break**

Following his exit from Spain and his travelling to Scandinavia on behalf of the ITF, Last became increasingly dejected at the political harangues that came his way during the early months of 1938. The fall of Teruel in late February 1938 made Last decide to renounce his CPH-membership, citing the lack of support for the Republic by the Soviet Union as the key factor in this decision. Following this declaration, the CPH started a slander-campaign that would come to fruition towards the mid-point of the year. Besides his political isolation, he was now also officially stateless and unable to return to the Netherlands. He moreover brought major hardship to his wife, as his status as political undesirable alien barred her from working and travelling. He and Ida Ter Haar separated to give her a fighting chance at raising their three daughters of her own accord. For Last this meant he now only had Gide to rely on as a close contact, even though his efforts for the ITF made it impossible for him to be frank about his activities. Gide, aware of Last's status as a pariah within the left, also took a step back leaving him more isolated than ever.

To add insult to injury April through September 1938 brought further denunciations by the CPH. The party had enlisted a former comrade of Last, Nico Rost, to write a denunciatory pamphlet on him. This document contained a wide variety of accusations, from Trotskyism to pederasty, but was powerful in particular because it succeeded in hammering home to a wide audience within the left exactly how isolated Last had become. The fact that Sneevliet on Last's behalf asked questions in parliament showed how toothless and helpless Last was in the revolutionary and activist sense. The consequence of this was that the Dutch government stopped looking out for him, and Last eventually made it back to the country, living off charity and commissions as he had done much of the decade. His complete and utter isolation – social, political, and emotional – left intact very little of his utopian resolve, and embittered him against taking action under a leftist aegis again until at least late 1941.

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<sup>330</sup> Jef Last, 'De wind verandert, de vaan staat vastgeroest?', in *De Gids*, October edition (1965)

## **Conclusion**

### **Breaking with communism: a pattern explained**

The research question of this thesis, as stated in the introduction, is; how did Jef Last's disaffection with communism and his consequential distancing from it materialise? Having extensively detailed his life and times up until 1939 it is now feasible to give a coherent answer to it. Jef Last's disillusion with communism did in fact not stem from his experiences in the Spanish Civil War as scholarship on his life claims, even though his experiences in that conflict affected his political positioning significantly. It is my contention that Last's political career from 1914 (as opposed to 1918!) until 1939 can be characterised by a pattern that manifests itself at least four times. The pattern itself consists of five processes, in which Last: 1) falls outside of a norm, 2) develops a recalcitrant attitude to that end, 3) discovers a better alternative, 4) throws himself into said alternative, 5) is met with rejection. This pattern then repeats itself, starting with the first observation occurring as a reaction to the fifth factor.

The first wave of this pattern is visible in Last's early life and the onset of his SDAP-days. As a young man he had to move around often due to his father's profession, which did not allow him to form many durable friendships and effectively led him to experience a very sheltered youth in a bourgeois family. The only escape from this was initially the Boy Scout's movement, which in itself was an element of the bourgeois lifestyle. The likelihood that Last felt like an outsider because of his sheltered youth is high, and the notion that he discovered through the Boy Scout movement that he had strong bisexual feelings (as he described in the 1960s) leads me to hypothesise that these two things reinforced one another. His experiences in Manchester in 1914 imbued him with fresh resolve to agitate against his bourgeois background, which resulted in his recalcitrance as a HBS schoolboy. In totality Last's recalcitrance against bourgeois-ness and its associated pattern of norms and values continued throughout his life. His affinity with the socialist movement that emerged from experiences working in Limburg and Brabant in 1916-17 paved way for Last's full-blown investment in the SDAP that emerged towards 1919, with notable casualties of this resolve being his Chinese Literature studies and his membership of the Leidsch Studenten Corps. Last's engagement with the SDAP continued until 1928, when he was unable to match his newfound strong opinions on colonialism through the LAI with the political strategies of that party.

The second wave emerged from the fact that the SDAP fired him from the film service and chastised him over his ties to the LAI. This restarted the cycle and saw Last write SDAP-critical articles for Henk Sneevliet's RSP as recalcitrant acts. Upon developing closer ties with the RSP it seems that Last again exalted the RSP as the new next best thing before becoming a member of the party. As a party member of the RSP he was quick to show great ambition and great capacity for connecting (with) people, which he also for the first time seemed to have prided himself in. The fact that Sneevliet was similarly strong-willed, socially savvy, and idealistic caused great discord between Last and himself. When Last was unable to continue working for the RSP on an equitable footing with Sneevliet the latter ejected him from the party.

Last's very brief RSP career ended rather abruptly and in superficial rejection and restarted the cycle into the third wave. Given Last's contention that the RSP was not always radical and revolutionary enough, his ideological kinship with the CPH is quite clear. However, the fact that he first decided to travel to the Soviet Union to see what a revolutionary society looked like is remarkably cautious in comparison to his other political engagements in the decade before. Eventually he again became completely enamoured with both the Soviet Union and the

communism it propagated throughout Europe. Last's desire to possibly relocate to the Soviet Union and his joining the German-led communist writer's union IVRS are examples of exactly how smitten he was by the time of his radicalisation into a revolutionary communist. The Soviet reaction to the impending political takeover by the Nazis in Germany did clearly shake Last's faith, but instead of experiencing this as rejection it hardened his resolve to work for the cause. His tireless efforts for the CPH and the International Red Help are the clear product of this, even though these were accompanied by glaring doubts about the justness and fairness of the Comintern towards critical elements.

Last's crisis of his communist faith commenced in 1934 with the renewed persecution of homosexuals in the Soviet Union. For nearly a year (March through December 1934) he would continue working for the IRH as well as publishing literary work which clearly did not conform to the principles of socialist realism and contained veiled criticism of the Soviet Union. When he met André Gide that year his crisis of faith gained permanence, which he often discussed with Gide. As Gide was a well-established literary figure in France as well as the Comintern through the Front Populaire movement, Last seems to have understood that Gide was in a position to vouch for him should he go too far with his attempts to criticise the Soviet Union. He met Gide in October 1934, and by February 1935 he had published an article condemning Soviet persecution of homosexuals, which in my understanding proves that Last looked for a political ally in Gide initially as much a kindred spirit. Gide's friendship however became one of Last's two durable relationships in his lifetime, with the other one being with his wife Ida ter Haar, and he came to (over)value it as such. Last's discomfort with the Trotskyist and Stalinist approaches for Gide's intellectual standing was hence twofold; he primarily feared having to declare for one side in order to be able to follow Gide in the Comintern, and in a secondary capacity feared Gide's becoming partisan would affect their personal friendship.

The culmination of the June 1935 First International Congress for the Defence of Culture in Gide's being summoned to the Soviet Union deepened Last's crisis of faith, leaving him feeling isolated both politically and personally with Gide. Last felt that the journey to the Soviet Union in July-August 1936 had a chance of being a major success, absolving him of his doubts and bringing him and Gide closer, and – ever the optimist – seems to have set his hopes on that. The consequent disaster the trip turned into represented to Last another great rejection. The complete perversion of the revolutionary ideal that he had observed between 1932 and 1936, as well as the return of bourgeois-style patterns of social conservatism regarding artistic freedom and sexual licence proved to be the final straw for both Last and Gide with regard to the Soviet Union. Last's recalcitrant follow-up came in the form of his travelling to Spain to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Rather than travelling there through the Comintern or the CPN, he used Gide's contacts to secure his position in a leftist – but not communist – militia. As a foreign fighter with the Columna Sargento Vazquez Last hoped to come closer to the socially progressive proletarian lifestyle that the Second Republic had become lauded for by the anti-Stalinist left. Distinguishing himself again for his ability to connect with people, his hardworking nature, and his multilingualism, Last experienced his time in Spain up until the Spring of 1937 quite positively. The growing influence of the Soviet Union in Spanish politics put a quick end to this, sending Last into another downwards spiral following his removal from combat, two court-martials, and the judgment that he was politically unreliable.

This in turn started the fourth wave of Last's patterned political engagement. He publicly – and to great adversity as Rost's pamphlet confirms – disavowed the CPN and was effectively played out as a political radical following this. The fact that he lost his national citizenship barred

him from re-entering the Netherlands legally, and moreover cost him his marriage to Ida ter Haar which greatly damaged their personal relationship for a time – even though they did support one another in the meantime. The fact that he remarried her after regaining his citizenship after the Second World War in my understanding confirms the notion that she was one of his two durable friendships of great depth. Last's depressive spiral continued throughout September 1938 into January 1939 and was clearly not helped by Gide's unavailability for that period. Last eventually made it out of this negative spiral when Edo Fimmen stepped up to ask Last to help him agitate against Nazism in the Norwegian iron ports. Fimmen's ITF in ideological terms was primarily antifascist, and in some ways close to the RSP, but did not necessarily attach itself to the Trotskyist International in the way Sneevliet had done so. Last's disaffection with both wings of the communist movement matched this independent approach to antifascist politics of the ITF, once again providing Last with a form of activism to throw himself into. From 1939 until his death in 1972 Last would continue to engage in this type of independent anti-bourgeois, antifascist leftism which ended up connecting him to the Provo movement in the 1960s, aligning him with the '68 generation, and overall providing him with plenty of connections.

So did his experiences in the Spanish Civil War cause Jef Last's disillusionment with communism? Based on the previously described pattern, no, these experiences clearly were part of the process, but in finality were not the unique cause of Last's disillusionment with communism. When Last threw himself into the communist cause following his ejection from the RSP it was merely a year before he held his first serious doubts about the movement following the Nazi seizure of power. Though he succeeded in staving off these doubts in the cause by redoubling his efforts for the IRH the introduction of the principles of socialist realism and the renewed persecution of homosexuals in the Soviet Union cemented the irreconcilability of Last's interests, principles, and views with the hard line set out by Moscow. The journey to the Soviet Union in 1936 readily confirmed this for Last, which galvanised him into looking for the socially progressive alternative in Spain on his own accord, which is why he joined a militia that had only a tangential relationship with Moscow. The consequent process of his denunciation and defamation pursued by the CPN and Last's own renunciation of his membership thereof in late February 1938 finalised what would become a life-long disillusionment with communism for Jef Last.

Taking into consideration existing scholarship, the pattern described above provides a wholly new template or lens through which we can understand Last as a political-cultural persona, war volunteer, and antifascist activist. Contextualising the interlinked layers of his personality, his sexual politics, his artistic politics, and his utopian views in the radical and at times totalitarian socio-political atmosphere of the 1930s he in my understanding must be viewed as a prime example of the invariably committed but ultimately impotent participant in the prelude to the ideological reckoning that the Second World War inflicted upon Europe. The dynamism of his political thinking is certainly not unique, and is of much greater significance than Stutje, Wester, and Kruizinga make it out to be in their scholarship on him. Last's navigation of intellectual networks is similarly more significant than the broader scholarship on Dutch Spanish Civil War volunteers posits and is indicative of a transnational mobility that has been under-researched in connection with the conflict. The key shifts in Last's political thinking are virtually all related to incidents or decisions made in or by the Soviet Union, which seems to be taken for granted in established scholarship. Few if any works on Dutch volunteers for the war in Spain seem to take into account that significant elements within the left in the Netherlands agitated actively against both their own state, the rising tide of fascism, and Stalinist interference in their revolutionary struggle. Overall, it



is apparent that any notions of immediate personal breaks-with-ideologies rather tend to be processes that take place on a sliding scale.

In finality, this MA-thesis has contributed a sharper, more nuanced view of Jef Last's relationship with communism in the 1930s. Its primary merit is that it has actively managed to challenge the narrow scholarship on Jef Last in their assertion that he joined an all-communist militia during his Spanish days. It has furthermore shown that participation in the European left during that time was an exercise of unity in diversity, with extremely blurry differences between competing interpretations of communism causing individuals to be driven into ideological isolation as the Second World War drew closer. It has provided an insight, through Last and Gide's correspondence, into the intellectual concerns that leftists from various walks of life held towards Stalinism – or 'communism with Russian characteristics'. It has provided a pattern that, with alterations and nuances, could be applied as a template from which to analyse the (hi)stories of other foreign veterans of the Spanish Civil War in a more independent and academically reliable way. Lastly, it has shown that through the forensic use of historical methods it is possible to uncover essential truths in the heavily politicised histories of Spanish Civil War volunteers.

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