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THE DEATH OF BOB SMILLIE: A REPLY

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In my article in *The Historical Journal*, 40 (1997) pp. 435–61 I concluded, primarily on the evidence collected by the Independent Labour Party's (ILP) investigator David Murray, that Bob Smillie, a volunteer with the ILP's contingent in the Spanish Civil War, had died of appendicitis. However, he had been the victim of an appalling degree of neglect by the prison authorities in Valencia. I also concluded that the ILP leadership had deliberately prevented Smillie's death from becoming a matter of political debate. The account by Georges Kopp presented by John Newsinger in *The Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 575–8 suggests a very different story: that the appendicitis was 'imaginary' and that Smillie was, in fact, kicked to death by his Communist interrogators for refusing to co-operate. Does Kopp's evidence necessitate a rethink of the Smillie case? I do not think so, and I believe that there are serious doubts surrounding both the nature of this evidence and the version of events that it presents.

First, Kopp's reliability as a witness needs to be questioned. This is significant because what is at issue is not an actual document but rather Kopp's alleged recollection of a 200-page dossier that he claims to have fleetingly had in his possession eighteen months previously and which had subsequently disappeared. (We are asked to believe that Kopp stole the files on Bob Smillie and Marc Rein from within the secret police headquarters in Barcelona and then smuggled them out to his contacts.) While Orwell admired and respected Georges Kopp, Orwell's biographers have been more sceptical. Michael Shelden, in particular, has emphasized that Kopp was a man of secrets who consistently reinvented his past.[1] The editor of the new *Complete works of George Orwell* notes that Kopp was 'not the most reliable of witnesses'.[2] Bert Govearts, who researched Kopp's life in detail, concluded that Orwell's 'gift for observation was grotesquely beaten by this very very curious man'.[3] Could this document, therefore, be another of his tall tales? John Newsinger writes that 'there is no reason to believe that Kopp would lie about such an episode'. However, it is important to note that in an earlier letter to the ILP, sent immediately following his release from prison, Kopp asked the party for the substantial sum of £50 to tide him over. The letter concludes: 'thanking you

[1] M. Shelden, *Orwell: the authorised biography* (London, 1991), pp. 297–8.

[2] P. Davison, ed., *The complete works of George Orwell, eleven, facing unpleasant facts, 1937–1939* (London, 1998), p. 338 n. 1.

[3] Govearts to Bill Alexander, 12 Feb. 1984, in Marx Memorial Library, London, International Brigade Archive, Box A-12, File Orw.

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for the loan I hope the ILP will be able to grant me'.[4] In this letter Kopp mentioned his alleged theft of the Smillie and Rein files, which he claimed to be awaiting him in France, but did not comment on their contents. Thus, it is likely that Kopp fabricated the whole story, telling the ILP leaders what he assumed they might wish to hear, in order to boost his reputation and value at a time of severe financial hardship.

What about the version of events offered by Kopp? Kopp claimed to have found evidence in a doctor's report that Smillie had received a severe beating that left him with appalling stomach and facial injuries, and that resulted in death thirty minutes after Smillie arrived at the hospital. This would imply that the injuries had been inflicted immediately prior to Smillie's hospitalization. However, David Murray's investigation, based on interviews with a range of independent witnesses, makes it clear that Smillie had been unwell for longer than a week before his death. This can be corroborated from a source in the Murray papers that I did not refer to in my original article. Fenner Brockway of the ILP told Murray that he had met a German comrade in Perpignan who had been in jail with Bob Smillie. His statement

> confirmed what you write. On June 4th Bob did not go out to play the ball game of which he was fond. The German comrade went to find out why. He was lying down and complaining of pains in the stomach. On the next day Bob was better and went out for a short time. The following day he was rather worse and became worse until the 8th, when the German was released. The German did not know of Bob's death and was, of course, shocked to hear about it.[5]

This is highly significant in the context of Kopp's account, because it must be recognized that Smillie's appendicitis was not merely some cover story invented by the authorities. There is a weight of evidence to show that Smillie was widely known to have been ill for many days. Unless the police interrogated and beat up a man who was already at death's door, there is no reason to doubt that Smillie's death was caused by appendicitis that was very far from 'imaginary'.

Kopp claimed that the dossier evidence was backed up by the word of a German prisoner, Gustav Doster, whom he met in January 1938. Doster had been, according to Kopp, 'in hospital when Bob was brought there, or told of the latter's arrival by somebody who was there'. This is rather vague evidence and it may well be that Doster – or his source – drew a false conclusion from Smillie's poor physical condition. Another detail from Murray's report that I

[4] National Museum of Labour History (NMLH), Manchester, Bob Edwards papers, Box 5, Kopp to the ILP, 14 Dec. 1938. The letter was sent from Toulouse. To Kopp's dismay the ILP was unable to help, pleading poverty, although a grant of £5 was apparently arranged through a French contact (University College London, Orwell Archive, 18 Dec. 1938, Kopp to Eric and Eileen Blair).

[5] National Library of Scotland (NLS), David Murray papers, Accs 7914, Box 1, file 1, Brockway to Murray, 15 July 1937 (Smillie was well enough to sign a letter on 7 June 1937 from seven British prisoners to the Consul in Valencia asking for newspapers to be sent. Public Record Office, FO 889/2).

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did not include in my article now takes on some significance. Murray reported, presumably from speaking to medical staff, that on arriving at hospital Smillie 'got up out of bed, staggered and fell, hitting his head. Was dead two hours after arrival'.[6] Injuries noticed by other patients may have been incurred in this way.

Finally, there is circumstantial evidence that tells against Kopp's account. First, he claimed that he used the missing file to blackmail the secret police and save his life. This does not appear to have been very effective as in his letter to the ILP of 15 December 1938 he records the appalling conditions in which he lived, including attempts to poison him with arsenic and to starve him to death. In any case, why should he ever have been allowed to leave prison if such a damning document was still apparently at his disposal? Secondly, it is important to note that Kopp's version of events made no apparent impact on the ILP leadership. There is no mention of it in Orwell's writing or in Orwell's papers,[7] while others who were listed as having been sent the letter, while clearly still puzzled by Smillie's death, had equally clearly not been influenced by Kopp.[8] John McNair, in a memoir written many years after the event, concluded that while many in Britain and France referred to this as 'another political assassination', he had 'refrained from doing this, having found no proof nor even direct evidence'. He stood by his view at the time that this was a case of 'criminal neglect'.[9] In his 1977 autobiography Fenner Brockway recalled coming away from a Spanish Interior Ministry briefing on Smillie's death feeling that 'there had been negligence at least. A strong boy should not have died from appendicitis.'[10] Almost fifty years after the event the British unit's commander, Bob Edwards, told one of Bob Smillie's relatives, rather confusingly, that he had died 'allegedly from food poisoning'[11]. Kopp had clearly failed to transform the ILP's view of the episode.

John Newsinger writes that brutal beating of prisoners to extract a confession was 'exactly what one would expect from the GPU'. Quite so, and many believed at the time that Smillie had indeed fallen victim to the secret police – either beaten or shot.[12] The rumour mill was fed by the fact that Smillie was buried so quickly and without independent medical examination.

[6] NLS, David Murray papers, Accs 7914, Box 1, file 1, report to ILP, 5 July 1937.

[7] Orwell was in Morocco between September 1938 and March 1939.

[8] The ILP National Administrative Council minutes between August 1938 and April 1939 do not appear to have survived, so it is impossible to establish whether Kopp's allegations were formally discussed.

[9] J. McNair, *Spanish diary* (n.p., n.d.), p. 21.

[10] Fenner Brockway, *Towards tomorrow* (London, 1977), p. 125. The ministry had erroneously claimed that Smillie had received medical treatment.

[11] NMLH, Bob Edwards papers, Box 5, letter dated 24 July 1986.

[12] See for instance the letter in the Orwell archive, 12 Aug. 1937, from Charlie Doran to Eric Blair. Doran, who had also been serving in the ILP unit, described how news reached them at the front that 'Smillie had been shot.' In a letter to H. N. Brailsford, 15 July 1937, the Labour Party's International Secretary William Gillies wrote that he believed that Marc Rein had been murdered. He went on: 'Despite Fenner Brockway's evidence, I suspect that Bob Smillie's son [sic] met the same fate' (NMLH, Labour Party archive, WG/RUS/170ii).

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However, for the reasons that I have outlined, Kopp's letter alone cannot be taken as evidence for Smillie's murder. Until Newsinger can produce some convincing documentary evidence to corroborate Kopp's claims,[13] the case for this version of events does not stand up against the only contemporary documentary evidence that we possess – David Murray's files. Kopp's story does not shake my belief that Smillie died, needlessly, of appendicitis aggravated by official neglect.

[13] The only hint of ill-treatment of Smillie in prison in Murray's papers came from an official at the British Consulate who, on 17 May, inferred that Smillie may have been beaten to make him sign a statement. However, this was an unsubstantiated comment, and when Murray subsequently met Smillie he told him that he had been well treated (NLS, David Murray papers, Accs 7914, Box 1, file 1, Murray's report of 5 July, p.1).

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