CHALLENGES FOR TROTSKYISM

PART ONE – REVOLUTIONARY DEFEATISM

The advance of German fascism in the Second World War posed the issue of how to defeat this reactionary force in the ranks of the Fourth International. The 'Manifesto' of the Fourth International on this issue was categorical. It called for opposition to the imperialist war in relation to the following question: “But isn't the working class obliged in the present conditions to aid the democracies in their struggle against German fascism? That is how the question is put by broad petty bourgeois circles for whom the proletariat always remains only the auxiliary tool of this or that faction of the bourgeoisie. We reject this policy with indignation. Naturally there exists a difference between the political regimes in bourgeois society just as there is a difference in comfort between various cars in a railway train. But when the whole train is plunging into an abyss, the distinction between decaying democracy and muderous fascism disappears in the face of the collapse of the entire capitalist system.”(1) This comment seems to imply that it is not possible to provide any political and military support for the aims of the bourgeois democratic imperialist powers in their military conflict with the forces of German fascism. The only principled task is to struggle for the world socialist revolution, and to utilise the situation of inter-imperialist war in order to promote this aim.

However, Trotsky also seems to provide important modifications of this perspective when he also argues that: “We do not wish to permit the bourgeoisie to drive untrained or half-trained soldiers at the last hour onto the battlefield. We demand that the state immediately provide the workers and the unemployed with the possibility of learning how to handle the rifle, hand grenade, the machine gun, the cannon, the airplane, the submarine, and other tools of war. Special military schools are necessary in close connection with the trade unions so that the workers can become skilled specialists of the military art, able to hold power as commanders.”(2) Given that this policy could only be appropriate in the countries of bourgeois democracy, he is suggesting that the efficiency of their armies could be improved if they were to accept the necessity of skilled training of the troops under trade union supervision. This would imply that this development would result in an enhanced morale and ability to oppose the armies of fascism. But Trotsky does not make this conclusion that seems to be the only possible conclusion of this policy. Instead he concludes that the inter-imperialist war is not in the interests of any section of the working class, and that the only principled approach is the perspective of world socialist revolution. Hence there is tension between his immediate policy which is to suggest how the efficiency of the armies of the bourgeois democracies can be improved, via the role of trade union supervision of the training of troops, and his overall approach which is to reject any support for imperialist countries in the Second World War.

What is needed in terms of reconciling the contradictions in his approach is a conception of how to oppose fascism. In other words this means that the aim of developing working class opposition to the military activity of the bourgeois democracies should be in order to promote a more effective ability to oppose fascism. But this point is not made, and instead Trotsky outlines a perspective that implies the approach adopted by Marxists during World War One is sufficient. The differences in relation to the Second World War are not taken into account. However, in a limited manner, Trotsky has accepted the importance of some differences in terms of his elaboration of what could be defined as the 'Proletarian Military Policy'. This call for the training of troops under trade union supervision does suggest that the aim of defence of the bourgeois democratic powers is in some sense being supported. Indeed, it would be illogical to call for the enhanced efficiency of the army in terms of its democratisation and yet not support its political aims in terms of opposing the expansion of fascism. Or it could be argued that to realise the democratisation of the army enables the transformation of the aims of the given imperialist power from an emphasis on its own interests into becoming the expression of opposition to fascism? This latter perspective could be the expression of a principled standpoint, which did not accommodate to the approach of social-patriotism if Trotsky had been willing to develop this policy. Instead the Proletarian military policy was elaborated in terms of important ambiguities. We will try to analyse whether James Cannon resolves these tensions.

Cannon outlines his conception of the Proletarian Military policy in terms of an acceptance of the significance of inter-imperialist rivalry which has led to war. Hence the situation of war will influence the character of the political process, and it cannot be possible to avoid the importance of the development of militarism. This analysis is connected to the prediction that German imperialism is becoming the superior power because of its victories. (This speech is made in 1940) The potential conflict will be between the USA and Germany for domination of the world. In this situation the revolutionary party cannot adopt a standpoint of pacifist rejection of the war. Instead it must accept that its members join the army, but this participation does not imply any support for the war. Consequently: “We say it is a good thing for the workers now to be trained in the use of arms. We are, in fact, in favour of the compulsory military training of the proletariat. We are in favour of every union going on record in for this idea. We want the proletariat to be well trained and equipped to play the military game. The only thing we object to is the leadership of a class that we don't trust. We don't want stoolpigeons of the boss as officers in our unions. Just as we don't want them as officers of our unions so we don't want them in the military forces. We are willing to fight Hitler. No worker wants to see that gang of fascist barbarians overrun this country or any country. But we want to fight fascism under a leadership that we can trust. We want our own officers – those who have shown themselves most devoted to their class, who have shown themselves to be the bravest and most loyal men on the picket line, those who are interested in the welfare of their fellow workers. These are precisely the type of people we want as officers. In the period when the whole working class youth is mobilised for war, those are the ones we want at the head of our battalions.”(3)

In this comment, Cannon is explicit that an army trained under the leadership and influence of the militants of the working class could engage in a principled manner with military action against the forces of fascism. However, there is also the assumption that if this situation does not develop the character of the war would remain imperialist, and so could not be supported. Indeed he goes on to suggest that if an army is trained in military camps established by the trade unions, this will enhance the efficiency and morale of the army: “And in that way, in the course of the development of the war, we will build up in the army a great class conscious movement of workers with arms in their hands who will be absolutely invincible. Neither the German Hitler or any other Hitler would be able to conquer them.”(4) This point has important precedents. The reactionary character of the military leaders in the French army meant that they were unable and unwilling to lead a resolute struggle against German military invasion. They feared the French working class more than the victory of Hitler. The result was capitulation. The ability of Hitler to achieve success in Europe was because of the rottenness of the various bourgeois democratic regimes. Hence Cannon is making the point that if the army is based on the leadership and significance of the working class it could be able to conduct a more resolute and principled struggle against fascism. The French bourgeoisie proved to be defeatist and willing to accept the victory of Hitler. The result was the formation of a regime of collaboration with the Nazis. This is why Cannon concludes: “The workers themselves must take charge of the fight against Hitler and anybody else who tries to invade their rights. This is the whole principle of the new policy that has been elaborated for us by Comrade Trotsky.”(5)

But Cannon is not naïve to suggest that a classical bourgeois government would willingly implement the proletarian military policy in order to oppose Hitler. The ruling class will resolutely maintain domination of the character and role of the army. Hence we cannot be content with protests against the war but instead must develop a perspective for revolutionary change. This is an unprecedented modification of past policy: “It did not occur to the best Marxists that the time had come when power must be seized by the workers in order to save civilisation from degeneration.”(6) Thus the strategy was that of supporting the development of revolutionary change in order to enhance the ability to oppose the threat of fascism. The war had proved that pacifist protest is ineffective, and the limitations of the reformist organisations are expressed. The reformist parties were completely unable to oppose the expansion of Fascism in France. Only coherent revolutionary organisation can begin to oppose fascism in an effective manner. The trade unions will either become passive in this situation of war, or else begin to develop their militancy in terms of the adoption of a revolutionary standpoint. The problem with this view is that Cannon implies that this development of working class struggle for power can only occur on the basis of inner party centralisation and rigid discipline. Any dissent is to be rejected. He proposes a control commission in order to uphold party discipline. Hence is this justification of a bureaucratic party what is required in order to relate to the complex demands of the situation?

But despite the limitations of the justification of rigid control of the party by its leadership, Cannon seems to have elaborated the Proletarian Military Policy in a principled manner. He outlines how it is not a justification of acceptance of what is still defined as an inter-imperialist war. But he recognises that the workers want to oppose fascism. This aim can be addressed in terms of establishing trade union control of the army, but in order for this possibility to occur it is necessary to advocate a revolutionary perspective that is opposed to the domination of bourgeois democracy, capitalism and imperialism. The most important argument for this perspective is that the regimes of bourgeois democracy such as France have proved unwilling to effectively oppose Hitler. Only the formation of a workers government will enable the struggle against Fascism to be conducted in an efficient manner. This standpoint seems to be principled and does not in any sense imply support for bourgeois democracy in the war. Indeed in a statement on the war in December 1941, Cannon comments: “We consider the war upon the part of all the capitalist powers involved – Germany and France, Italy and Great Britain – as an imperialist war.”(6) This indicates that support for the Proletarian military Policy need not undermine the advocacy of opposition to the inter-imperialist war. The point is being made that the forces of imperialism cannot conduct a just war, but this recognition does not compromise the necessity of the aim of opposing fascism. The aim is to form a workers government in order to carry out principled war against fascism, and which will promote the development of proletarian revolution in Germany as part of this process of undermining the Hitler regime. The USSR is supported in its war with Germany because it is defined as a degenerated workers state. This view underestimates the extent of the repressive character of the Stalinist state. It would be more realistic to recognise the just character of the war waged by the USSR as part of a conflict for national survival.

The most important argument against the Proletarian Military Policy is that whilst it is envisaged as being possible under capitalism, which would raise the possibility that just war against fascism could occur in the conditions of an army based on the leadership of the trade unions, in actuality it is only feasible in conjunction with the process of revolutionary change and the overthrow of capitalism. Thus whilst there is the hint of accommodation to social patriotism, this tendency is not realised and instead the Proletarian Military Policy is more feasibly and practically expressed in terms of the role of the realisation of revolutionary change. In this manner, it is quite logical to maintain resolute opposition to the inter-imperialist war. Indeed this was the approach of the American Socialist Workers Party, but it could also argue that the most effective manner in which fascism could be opposed and defeated was in terms of the formation of a workers government in the USA. This development would encourage the German workers to oppose the Nazi regime and so enhance the process of the defeat and overthrow of the Hitler regime.

The major difference with the rival Workers party concerned the issue of defence of the Soviet Union. Max Shachtman, the leader of the Workers Party initially elaborated his standpoint in his article: 'The Soviet Union and World War'(8) His approach implies that the issue of defence of the Soviet Union is no longer valid because the relationship between Germany and the USSR is one of mutual support for imperialist expansion. The USSR has become an ally of one imperialist camp against the other. The result was the role of Stalin in the division of Poland, and the invasion of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. This situation also means that the USSR effectively supports the imperialist war carried out by Germany in the West. Consequently, Shachtman asks the following question: “Wherein is Russia' participation in the war reactionary? In two respects: (1) it is acting primarily as an agent of German imperialism in the war; (2) it is itself fighting a war of bureaucratic expansion, of subjugation and oppression of other peoples.”(9) This point would seem to have validity given the actual empirical actions of the USSR and its subservience to the interests of German imperialism. Shachtman admits that the character of Stalinist imperialism is not the same as that which occurs under capitalism because of its different social character. In contrast the supporters of Cannon are unable to explain the development of Soviet imperialism because of their flawed view that the USSR is a type of degenerated workers state. Instead their position of defence of the USSR results in the justification of Soviet imperialism. Indeed, this standpoint of defence of the USSR is based on the problematical view that its nationalised economy is inherently progressive, instead it is the basis of the exploitation of the producers.

This view of the Workers Party would seem to be credible for 1940. However Shachtman also comments that it may be necessary to change policies if circumstances alter: “If at a later stage, the present war between the imperialists should be transformed into an assault upon the Soviet Union, the slogan of defencism would have to be raised again, for it is not in the interests of the socialist world revolution and the working class to have one sixth of the world, which the October uprising removed from control of imperialism restored to capitalist exploitation. In the present war, however, the world proletariat, Russian included, cannot take it upon itself a shadow of responsibility for the participation of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the imperialist conflict.”(10) It would seem logical that the German imperialist invasion of the USSR would bring about this acceptance of a defence of the USSR in terms of opposition to its reduction to being a slave state of the Nazis. But instead of this logical standpoint, the view taken by the Workers Party was that the USSR had become part of the Anglo-American camp and so could not be supported. This ignored the fact that what was occurring was a situation of national survival and opposition to repressive invasion by the Fascist forces. In this context defence of the USSR did not mean justifying the view that the USSR was a degenerated workers state, and nor did it mean bestowing on the Red Army a progressive character. Instead the position adopted by the Workers Party was an example of rigid thinking and the inability to define the situation in flexible terms. In the name of principles they were indifferent to the struggle of the Soviet people against their reduction to being the slaves of the Nazis.

In 1940, the Workers party issued a statement: “Against both War Camps – for the Camp of World Labor!”(11) It is a principled opposition to all the contending forces in the inter-imperialist war, but it is also a pacifist document which attempts to propose a policy for the continued non-involvement of the USA in the war. It calls for jobs and not armaments, and does not accept that workers are receptive to the possibility of military struggle against fascism. Hence it comments: “Labor must fight not to die in the trenches for the greater glory and profit of Wall Street; labor must fight for a workers government.”(12) This means that this pacifist approach does not recognise that the necessity of a perspective for opposing fascism, and instead promotes the continued isolation of the USA in the world war. This pacifist approach to the inter-imperialist war is not as principled as the advocacy of the Proletarian Military Policy which at least provides an answer to the question about how to oppose fascism in international terms. The Workers Party standpoint abstains on the issue of the question of what attitude to adopt towards the war, and how to develop a revolutionary response. Primarily it avoids the issues involved concerning the necessity to overcome fascism. In contrast, Cannon's standpoint tackles these questions, and this is why he supports the Proletarian Military Policy. This approach may have its limitations, but it does not avoid awkward issues in the manner of the Workers Party. The result of their stance is a justification of pacifism, and the development of an action programme that has little to do with the questions generated by the war. Thus we can suggest that the American SWP had a more principled and relevant programme in relation to the issues created by the onset of the inter-imperialist war.

In an article tackling the issue of the character of fascism, Shachtman fails to outline any aspects of the opposition of socialism to its expansion. Instead he outlines the various contradictions and limitations of Dwight Macdonald concerning its character. (13) These issues are not unimportant, but what is of vital significance is the question of tactics and strategy in relation to the tasks of opposing imperialist war. This aspect involves the crucial aspect of how fascism is to be opposed and defeated. Instead Shachtman considers it more important to outline the limitations in the analysis of fascism by a prominent intellectual of the left. In the second article, Shachtman tackles the more important issue of the Proletarian Military Policy of the American Socialist Workers Party. He questions the view that the working class should assume responsibility for leading the war against fascism. The assumption is that this can only result in the justification of accommodation to bourgeois democracy. But this point is not outlined in explicit terms, and is instead only assumed. But he then outlines in more detail that the starting point for principled politics should be that it is only possible and permissible for the development of principled opposition to fascism in terms of the prior overthrow of the bourgeois government. The prospect of national defence depends on the working class overthrowing the domination of the bourgeoisie. But he contends that Cannon's interpretation of the Proletarian Military Policy means that the role of national defence is not dependent on this prior condition of the establishment of a workers government: “Up, to now, Cannon together with all other partisans of Marxism declared that national defence in an imperialist war was permissible only after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Today, in virtue of the “new policy”, Cannon declares that national defence is permissible “simultaneously” with the struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie. In other and simpler words, national defence in imperialist war is permissible while the bourgeoisie still rules.”(14)

This conclusion is a simplification of the view of Cannon. The point is that the ability to develop the democratisation of the army could only occur alongside the process of revolutionary change. It is possible that dual power might have emerged which would be a new situation whereby the working class is able to influence the political situation in a radical manner. In this context, the role of national defence might not be expressing the defence of capitalism and imperialism and instead could have assumed a principled anti-fascist character. Hence the advocacy of the proletarian military policy would not represent an opportunist acceptance of national defence and instead could be part of the process of the revolutionary transformation of society. Shachtman also maintains that he is not against an independent people’s militia that really represented the influence and importance of the trade unions, and its ability to defend the interests of the working class. But he considers that Cannon is suggesting that it is possible to establish trade union control of the imperialist army. This policy is both unrealistic and opportunist: “Trade Union control of military training in the present army is essentially class collaborationist, finally, because the trade union “controllers” would only be captives of imperialism, could only be the executors of the policy and purpose of the army, both of which are decided or determined by the imperialist bourgeoisie and its executive committee – the government, the President-Commander in Chief and his Staff.”(15) This point may have validity for the most typical periods of the class struggle, in which the bourgeoisie retains its dominance. But in a situation of the upturn of class conflict, in which dual power is placed on the agenda, the issue of trade union control of the army becomes an issue of practical relevance. Then it would be considered conservative to merely be in favour of an independent people’s militia. Instead actual control of the bourgeois army becomes a genuine issue. This aspect would be expressed most principally in terms of the development of trade union control. The question as to whether such an army would be able to develop war with fascism would depend on the character of the balance of the class forces.

The point is that the criticisms of the SWP by Shachtman are motivated by acceptance of the importance of pacifist moods within the working class, and acceptance of what has been popular opposition to conscription. Hence Shachtman comments about the pacifism of the masses: “It represents the justified suspicion that fills the people about the imperialist war mongers and their wars. It represents their hatred and dread of the horrors of war which has become a permanent phenomenon of the rotten social order. It represents their yearning for peace, for security. It is often possible to make a bloc with pacifists against social patriots, for example, never possible to make one the other way around.”(16) Shachtman's adaptation to pacifism meant that he was indifferent to the increasingly anti-fascist mood of the American workers. This is why he refused to adopt more than a vague anti-war platform. He argues that Cannon is indifferent to the progressive possibilities of the pacifist mood, but this is because Cannon recognises that it will not express the potential to develop revolutionary class consciousness. What is more promising is to relate to anti-fascist moods within the workers and to try and relate this influence to the role of a revolutionary strategy. Instead of trying to promote anti-fascism and a connected perspective of proletarian revolution, Shachtman's major concern is with promoting a referendum to oppose America's involvement in the war. Thus in actuality, Shachtman is not promoting a revolutionary perspective in order to promote the demise of capitalism, but is instead adapting to pacifism and its anti-war stance. In contrast, Cannon is promoting an imaginative policy in order to connect the anti-fascist moods of the workers with the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society.

In his third article on 'Fascism and the War', Shachtman opposes the view of Sidney Hook who argues that is necessary to support liberal democracy against fascist totalitarianism. He emphasises that the war is imperialist and that no side deserves support. But he upholds this view by suggesting that the anti-fascism of the working class of the liberal democracies can only increase the support for Hitler within Germany: “The first consequence of labour and socialist support to the imperialist democracies in the war is consolidation of Hitler’s ideological stranglehold over the German masses.”(17) Thus he cannot comprehend anything progressive about anti-fascist consciousness. The problem with his standpoint is that he seems indifferent to the task of how to defeat fascism. He rightly criticises the accommodation to bourgeois democracy of Hook, and principally calls for the political independence of the working class from all capitalist governments. But he has nothing to advocate apart from the call to the workers to carry on the class struggle. The only concrete policy that he promotes is the necessity of America's non-involvement in the war. This seems to be a credible policy in 1940. It is totally undermined by the events of 1941, and America's entry into the war.

In answer to Lovestone's view that support for the bourgeois democracies in the imperialist war will promote the task of socialist revolution, Shachtman convincingly argues that this perspective ignores the reactionary character of the liberal capitalist regimes. They cannot realise progressive liberation of the peoples of Europe. (18) But this standpoint is combined with rejection of any type of war against fascism as reactionary, and so he denies the ability of the working class to be able to develop its own distinctive form of opposition to fascism. Only in his fifth article does he address the issue of how the working class can overcome the reactionary challenge of fascism. He rejects the view that the forces of labour and capital should unite against fascism. He outlined the history of the rise of fascism and how it promotes aggressive policies in order to promote the profits of German capitalism. This approach contributed to the development of war. Therefore the character of recent events indicates that declining capitalism is increasingly likely to adopt fascist methods in order to maintain its economic and political power. The choice is between fascism and socialism. (19) In the final article on fascism, Shachtman finally admits that the international working class is motivated by opposition to fascism. He comments: “In fact, the intense feeling that the workers have against fascism – not against Germany or the German people, but against fascism – is one of the factors that gives a different aspect to this world war, even if it does not change the character of the war from the imperialist conflict it is.”(20) He finally outlines what this should mean in terms of the development of an independent programme. He rejects any justification of continuation of the domination of capital in order to carry out war against fascism. He outlines how capitalism has a tendency to undermine the realisation of democratic rights and contends that the forces of labour should continue to uphold their independent strength in the war situation. He outlines a programme calling for the nationalisation of the war industries, the expropriation of the wealth of the sixty major families, for a six hour day without reduction in wages, and the formation of a people’s army under the genuine control of labour: “Labor needs and must have its own army, to fight against reaction and Fascism no matter where it appears, an army it controls completely, which is officered by it, which is trained and armed not to fight for colonies, not to fight for the extension of oppression and exploitation, but to fight for the rights and interests of the people, for the democracy of labor.”(21) This approach is similar to that of Cannon. It is accepted that a people’s army founded within a capitalist society may have the objective of opposing fascism. This view is reinforced by the demand that in the conscript army the soldiers should have full democratic rights. The soldiers would have the ability to form rank and file committees that would present demands to the officers. But Shachtman is explicit that only under a workers government could a principled struggle against fascism occur. However, in many aspects he has accommodated to the policy of Cannon. Formally he is for an independent people’s army, but the role of this organisation could become the basis to oppose fascism even if capitalism has still not been overthrown. Shachtman has accepted many of the views of Cannon when formulating his own version of the opposition of the Workers Party to fascism.

But Shachtman still insists that his approach is different from Cannon's in an article: 'Working Class Policy in War and Peace'. (22) He outlines how the US SWP has undermined the struggle against conscription in order to accommodate their new policy, and the policy of trade union control of the army means to reject the perspective of the formation of an independent people's militia: “The army and the police, the armed forces in general, are the principal props of the bourgeois state machine. To tell the workers that they can reform this machine is to abandon one of the principles of revolutionary Marxism.”(23) He argues that it is not possible to establish workers control of the army because it represents an integral aspect of the role of the state. The aspect of struggling for democratic rights for the army does not mean having any illusions that this institution can be transformed in its character. Instead it remains an organ of the bourgeois state. But it is possible to develop a people’s militia that is under the independent control and organisation of the workers. In contrast, the logic of Cannon's position is to uphold the defence of the bourgeois state and its imperialist wars, in the name of opposing fascism. However, the problem with this intransigent position is that the issue of how to oppose fascism is denied its importance. The point being made by Cannon is that the promotion of the influence of the working class within the army, if genuine democratisation is carried out, can transform its character. But in order for this to become a genuine possibility requires an effective struggle to democratise the army. This is possible under the conditions of mass conscription, when the army is susceptible to mass influences. In this specific context the role of the army could become influenced by the anti-fascist consciousness of the new working class recruits. However, if the role of the revolutionary party is not successful in this context, the proletarian military policy will be a failure. The point is that this policy is connected to the development of class consciousness.

In contrast, the approach of Shachtman is based on the success of opposition to conscription and keeping the USA out of the world war. This policy is more unrealistic than Cannon's. For it attempts to uphold the illusion that the USA can avoid becoming involved in the general inter-imperialist war. Hence, whatever its limitations, the approach is Cannon is more realistic and based on the recognition that is necessary to develop a socialist policy connected with the likely USA involvement in the war. In this context, the SWP have an approach that is able to connect the significance of the war to the struggle against fascism. In contrast, the Workers Party has an isolationist stance that is based on the view that attempts to deny the significance of changing events. Hence principles are maintained at the expense of trying to come to terms with actual developments. Thus it is possible to criticise Cannon for opportunism because the US SWP is trying to develop a practical policy that relates to the importance of the continuing escalation of the war. Hence any adaptations to reformism are an expression of its greater realism. For example, it recognises that the possibility of opposing conscription is an illusion. Support for this policy indicates that the Workers party have an approach based in the past and the period of isolationism of the USA. The outbreak of world war in 1939 has indicated that this approach is antiquated. Instead it is necessary to develop an approach that is connected to changing developments. Hence the elaboration of the Proletarian Military Policy.

The invasion of the Soviet Union by the forces of German fascism would seem to imply that the Workers Party would assume the position of defence of the USSR against the threat of being reduced to a slave state. Shachtman outlined his response in an article: “The War Today is What is was Yesterday – Imperialist”(24) He asks the question as to whether the new turn of events should alter the approach of the Workers Party concerning the imperialist war. The article outlines how Hitler is motivated by the aim of overcoming any military threat from the USSR, and in order to obtain materials for the continuation of the military campaign on both the Eastern and Western fronts, and ideologically carry out the attempt to defeat Bolshevism. However the attack on the Soviet Union does not alter the character of the war. This development is an integral aspect of the inter-imperialist war with the UK, and the conquest of Russia is necessary in order to promote this ambition of defeating British imperialism. The USSR has become an ally of British imperialism: “So far as the predominant character of the war is concerned, it remains essentially the same. Only now, instead of an inter-imperialist war in which the USSR is a junior partner of the Axis, subordinated to its aims in the war, it is an inter-imperialist war in which the Soviet Union is a junior partner of Anglo-American imperialism, subordinated to its aims in the war.”(25) This is a dogmatic conclusion which omits any reference to the interests of the Soviet people and the necessity to reject the aims of German fascism which includes the creation of a slave state in Russia in order to promote the aims of Hitler. Instead of this recognition of the concerns of the Soviet people, Shachtman justifies his standpoint in terms of reference to the reactionary role of Stalinism, and the imperialist aims of the bureaucracy, and its counter-revolutionary control of the Soviet state. These points are true, but they do not mean that the defence of the Soviet Union has not become an urgent task because of the invasion carried out by German fascism.

Shachtman contends that it is not possible to defend a regime that has carried out reactionary invasion of other territories, and has repressed the people. He argues that he is for the overthrow of this regime. These points are true, but it will not be possible for the Soviet people to overthrow Stalinism if they are successfully conquered by the German army. Only when the forces of German fascism have been defeated will it be possible to renew the struggle to oppose the regime. Shachtman is right to suggest that the issue of defending the nationalised economy of the USSR is a reactionary abstraction. This economy has only promoted the exploitation of the Soviet workers and peasants. Instead the actual and acute issue was that of ensuring the survival of the Soviet people, and defeating the genocidal aims of the Hitler regime. In this context, Shachtman's unrealistic and foolish call for the Soviet people to carry on the struggle against the Soviet bureaucracy is completely impractical. Instead the immediate aim is to defeat the Nazi forces, and only in this context does the question of opposing the Stalinist regime acquire practical importance. Objectively, whatever their subjective intentions the Workers Party are indifferent to the plight of the Soviet people after the German invasion. This apparent indifference indicates that rigid theory obscures and undermines developing genuine human sympathy for the victims of Nazi aggression. Instead of being concerned with the actuality of the terrible Nazi invasion of the USSR, Shachtman is preoccupied by the fact that the USSR is on the side of the UK and USA. This is obviously an aspect of the situation, but it is secondary when compared to the necessity for the USSR to carry out a genuine war of national liberation in order to overcome the problem of German imperialist invasion. However, this concern should not justify the suppression of the people of Eastern Europe when the USSR engaged with the German army beyond its own frontiers. Contrary to the propaganda of the US SWP the Red Army was not progressive and instead still obeyed the aims of Stalin. Thus support for the USSR and its war of national defence had to be conditional on the circumstances. There was no justification for the Red Army accepting the Nazi repression of the Warsaw uprising. This incident indicated that the USSR's reactionary aims became primary when it entered Eastern Europe in 1944.

Albert Glotzer elaborated the approach of the Workers Party in his article: 'Hitler's Attack on Russia – a New Turn in the War'. (26) He outlines how the attack on the USSR by the German army is an attempt to gain additional resources for the forthcoming confrontation with the USA. Furthermore, Hitler was no longer satisfied with existing gains and instead had to try to obtain a new and important victory by defeating the USSR. Ironically he accepts that the view of the Cannon group that defending a workers state is the only criteria for justifying support for the Soviet state in its war with German imperialism. However, he rejects the plausibility of this reasoning because he concludes that the USSR is not a workers state: “A defence of Stalin can be justified only on the following grounds that the base of world socialism is threatened, that it is socialism in the USSR which is being attacked, and that a workers state, however degenerated, is imperilled. None of these conditions obtain in the present situation.”(27) This comment indicates the extent to which the argument is being developed in ideological terms which have little reference to the actual events and situation of the Soviet people. The point is that the USSR is not any type of workers state, but this point is irrelevant in the given circumstances. What is important is that the invasion by the German imperialist army means that the national liberation of the Soviet people has become an urgent task. In this context support for the actions of the Red Army does not mean support for Stalin, as the Soviet people were well aware of, and instead it is necessary in order to liberate the USSR from the problem of foreign conquest. Glotzer is correct to comment that: “Stalin is fighting solely for the preservation of his bureaucratic regime which ruthlessly exploits the Russian proletariat.”(28) This point is true, but simultaneously the Soviet people are struggling to oppose the invasion of the German army. They know that success in this struggle could result in the undermining of the Stalinist dictatorship. Furthermore, it is argued that: “The attack upon the Soviet Union is merely a tangent of the main current of the war: the struggle between German imperialism and Anglo-American imperialism.”(29) Such a view may be formally true, but this does not deny the importance of the fact that the Soviet people are carrying out a just defensive struggle for national liberation. This war will be of vital importance, and contributed greatly to the ultimate defeat of German imperialism. Hence it would be more accurate to suggest that what was occurring was an inter-imperialist war combined with a struggle for national liberation which was similar to the attempt of China to overcome the expansionist aims of Japanese imperialism.

It is true for Glotzer to contend that the nationalised economy of the USSR should not be defended because it is an exploitative regime, and so the Soviet Union cannot in any manner be fighting on behalf of the aims of socialism. In this manner he is right to argue that the importance of nationalised property does not define the character of the war between the USSR and German imperialism. But the actual fact that the USSR is based on an exploiting society via the role of nationalised property is also not an adequate reason not to support its opposition to German imperialism. Hence the following view of Glotzer is dogmatic: “If it is true, if a workers state existed in the Soviet Union, if it represented the world base for socialism, an alliance with England or America would not, in and of itself, make Russia's role reactionary in this war. But this does not obtain in the Soviet Union. It is, we repeat, precisely the class position of Stalin's bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, and the relation of that bureaucracy to world imperialism in this war, which makes it reactionary.”(30) But this point is entirely one-sided, it ignores the fact that the role of the Soviet people is generating a popular and emancipatory aspect to what is a war of national defence. In this context what is occurring is a genuine war of national liberation in order to reject the enslavement of the Soviet people. The reactionary character of the Stalinist regime can only distort and undermine this aspect of popular struggle. Indeed, Glotzer considers that the war of national defence of the USSR is reactionary and an expression primarily of the ideology of Stalin. Hence this view ignores the reality of popular opposition to the Nazis. Glotzer is right to contend that the Stalin regime cannot carry out a revolutionary war of liberation. But this truth does not mean that a war of national defence is merely opportunist and an expression of accommodation to Anglo-American imperialism. The generation of nationalist sentiments caused by the war in the USSR is an expression of the dire situation, the fact of a war for national survival caused by the repressive actions of German imperialism. The abstract ideology of Glotzer cannot recognise the progressive aspect of this sentiment. He is right to suggest that Stalin cannot promote revolutionary socialist methods during the war because of the exploitative regime he upholds, but this aspect is not sufficient to deny support to the Soviet Union which was conducting a legitimate war of national defence.

In this context the US SWP was right to subordinate the aim of the overthrow of the bureaucracy to the immediate task of defending the USSR. But Glotzer seems to consider that it is possible to promote the aim of the overthrow of the bureaucracy as being an immediate necessity of the Soviet working class: “So long as Stalin and his bureaucracy remain the struggle is doomed. The defence of the Soviet Union is genuine only if it carried with it the aim of destroying the bureaucracy, seeks to re-establish Soviets, the trade unions and economic and political democracy of the workers and peasants. Any other defence is a defence of the “power, prestige and revenues” of the regime. Those who seek to couple a revolutionary defence of the Soviet jointly with Stalin against Hitler, or what they deem to call a struggle against capitalism, are in an insoluble contradiction and will never be able to extricate themselves from it.”(31) This comment ignores the fact that whilst the Soviet people did not support Stalin they recognised that it was necessary to defend the USSR against the expansionist aims of German Fascism. In this context, the issue of defence of the Soviet Union become important despite the repressive limitations of the Stalin regime.

In an article by Max Shachtman: “Only Socialism can Bring Peace and Freedom” he emphasised the view that it was not possible to define the actions of the Soviet Union in terms of a just war of national defence. (32) He contended that the Workers party rejected the pressure to support the Soviet Union when it became part of the Anglo-American camp because of the German invasion. But he is correct to outline how the Soviet Union can no longer claim to be conducting a war of national defence with its subjugation of Poland and domination within Eastern Europe. He also outlines how the working class of Europe is mobilising against capitalism in a revolutionary manner, as in Italy. He argues that the policy of the Workers Party has been vindicated with the uprising of the workers of Europe. But what he does not mention is that this development is closely connected with the struggle of the workers against Fascism. This has been the motivation which has caused the possibility for the overthrow of capitalism within Europe. In contrast the Workers Party has little to advice in this context, instead its emphasis on opposing the imperialist war means that its preoccupations is with the task of proletarian revolution in the abstract: “Against the two war camps, we said the banner of the Third Camp must be raised. That is the banner of the oppressed classes and nations, of the colonial and semi-colonial peoples and the working class of the advanced countries. It is the banner of the struggle against imperialist war and for the triumph of socialism.”(33) This comment is formally true, but it offers no strategic advice about the balance of class forces, and the prospects for overthrowing capitalism in the present situation. He provides no analysis of the situation in Europe, and in relation to the prospects of the working class for ending capitalism. Instead there is the insular view that the Workers Party have maintained a policy of opposition to both imperialism and Stalinism.

COMMENTS ABOUT THE TROTSKYIST APPROACH TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

J.P Joubert has written an article on 'Revolutionary Defeatism'(34) He outlines how the revolutionary defeatism of Lenin, which was for transforming the imperialist war into a civil war, was formally not upheld in the events of 1917. The emphasis became connected to the tasks of overthrowing the Provisional government, and accepting that the slogans of defeatism were not popular and had become irrelevant. Trotsky elaborated Lenin's approach in the 1930's and outlined how defence of the Soviet Union could be permissible even if it was in one of the imperialist blocs during a military conflict. He rejected the view that the approach should be one of supporting democracy against fascism in the imminent imperialist war, but anti-war tactics could differ. He maintained the necessity of irreconcilable struggle against all the imperialist powers in relation to the development of a new world war. This article does not explain that Trotsky did consider the issue of defending democracy against fascism to be important and in a brief note in 1939 he suggested that the decaying regimes of decaying democracy cannot uphold democracy against the threat of fascism, but he implies that this task is principled and worthwhile. Hence he comments: “You workers wish to defend and improve democracy. We, of the Fourth International wish to go further. However we are ready to defend democracy with you, only on the condition that it should be a real defence, and not a betrayal in the Petain manner.”(35) This comment was ambiguous about whether it could be principled to defend a bourgeois democratic regime against the threat of fascism. In order to try and overcome this confusion the Proletarian Military Policy was elaborated.

Sam Levy outlines how this approach was an important aspect of the revolutionary programme, and outlined the necessity of compulsory military training under the control of the trade unions. (36) He argues that the manner in which the Proletarian Military Policy was interpreted implied concessions to social patriotism in terms of blurring over the continued importance of opposing the war aims of the bourgeois democracies in the Second World War. He implies that the tensions of this policy was never properly resolved, but instead it became effectively discarded because of the concentration on the issue of defence of the USSR. But he argues that the alternative to the possible tensions of the Proletarian Military Policy was not to defend Lenin's defeatism in an antiquated manner. Levey suggests that the perspective of revolutionary defeatism was not practical, and in this aspect the Proletarian Military Policy, for all its limitations, was still superior. He argues that the Proletarian Military Policy represented a transitional approach that connected the development of imperialist war with the struggle for power: “The concept was linked to the question of power, whereas not one of the revolutionary leaders during the First World War linked their concepts to the question of power, at the very best they hoped for it. It assumed the following – the reactionary nature of the war; that the transformation of society was on the order of the day; and the need for a policy to do this – the PMP.”(37) The perspective was also developed in relation to the importance of the fact that the French bourgeoisie capitulated to Hitler, and betrayed the struggle against fascism. However, this possibility to advocate the Proletarian Military Policy was undermined by the military situation and the extent of the defeat of the working class in Europe. The result of this situation was pessimism within international Trotskyism, and the increasing influence of views which undermined the revolutionary role of the working class. Furthermore, the Red Army consolidated the influence of counterrevolution by acceptance of the Nazi repression of the Warsaw uprising. The Fourth International, in particular the American SWP, did not seem to understand the significance of these events, and the importance of the counterrevolutionary control of Eastern Europe by the Stalinists. The approach of revolutionary defeatism did not seem to be realistic when compared to the significance of the power of the forces of counterrevolution: “We thus come to a position that either there was a realistic policy but none of us knew what it was or, even more absurdly no policy could have worked, and therefore we should have done nothing. It is precisely a one-sided picture of reality that creates these assumptions.”(38)

But there was an alternative to this confusion. This was the recognition that the struggle against Fascism was popular within Europe. The aim of the Fourth International should have been to connect these developments to a strategy for revolutionary power. But instead of being able to provide international leadership the American SWP was preoccupied with the necessity to oppose arguments that denied the possibility of socialist revolution in Europe. Levey is right to suggest that in relation to countries controlled by the Nazis a policy of national independence should have been linked to the aim of socialism. We can add that the demand for the formation of the democratic republic would have expressed a starting point, and not opposition, to the struggle for socialism. Instead the SWP called for the united states of Europe in the most abstract manner. They had no transitional demands to connect to this aim. Levy outlines the political situation within the SWP in the following terms: “The Cannon faction started from the opinions of Trotsky in 1940, as if they were the final word, proclaiming that the revolution was here and almost asserting that the European Trotskyists had already emerged as a power to lead the revolutionary struggle. On the other hand the SWP minority and RCP majority pointed to the re-emergence of a strengthened Social Democracy and Stalinism, posing the question of a short and possibly unstable period of bourgeois democracy, counterposing the need to struggle for the maximum amount of democracy in capitalist society, to build up the Trotskyist movement and to expose the limitations of this democracy so that the struggle could go beyond it. Demands, for example, In Belgium and Italy for a republic instead of a monarchy, were expressions of this concept.”(39) The point was to develop a democratic programme that could oppose the bourgeois democratic counterrevolution that was occurring at the end of the war. Instead the situation was characterised by dogmatism and an inability to relate to actual developments in the class struggle. The Fourth International did not have a flexible policy by which to respond to rapidly changing events.

What Levy does not mention is that the Fourth International never developed a policy to oppose fascism. James Cannon had raised the issue of the fact that the working class is opposed to fascism, but he never elaborated this thought into systematic policy. It was mentioned that the defencist views of the working class did not mean support for imperialist war aims, but this recognition of the importance of the views of the workers was never translated into a systematic approach. The problem was that the concern not to capitulate to the standpoint of national defence meant that a perspective of anti-fascist struggle was not elaborated. The result of this indecision was an abstract form of revolutionary defeatism, which led the Workers Party to even reject the defence of the USSR after 1941. The point is that principled anti-fascism need not mean the defence of an imperialist country. Far from it. Instead it would have meant in the France of 1940, the development of militant struggle against the French bourgeoisie which was determined to bring about capitulation to German fascism. In this context the development of proletarian control of the army would have been crucial for the beginning of genuine struggle against the German army. But this process may have matured before the proletariat would formally have realised proletarian power. Would national defence in this situation have meant support for French imperialism? On the contrary, the role of national defence by the leadership of the working class would have been an integral aspect of the attempt to realise the political domination of the proletariat. If successful this perspective would have meant a situation of dual power, which would have become a prelude to the ascendency of the working class to complete political supremacy. Instead the Fourth International was unable to recognise these possibilities. Instead it operated with fixed and unconnected categories such as revolutionary defeatism, and the related rejection of a struggle against fascism. This meant in the UK reluctance to call for the overthrow of the Coalition government in order to conduct a more effective struggle against fascism. If such a struggle had been successful, the second front could have been realised at an earlier date, and the counterrevolutionary intrigues of Stalinism opposed. A genuine war of liberation against fascism could have been developed. Instead of such a programme the Fourth International tend to accommodate to the illusion that the Red Army would liberate Europe. This approach was only effectively rejected when the Stalinists had completed their domination of Europe.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Leon Trotsky: Manifesto of the Fourth International, in Writings 1939-40, Pathfinder Press New York p221

(2) ibid p221-222

(3)James Cannon, Military Policy of the Proletariat, (October 1940) Marxist Internet Archive p6-7

(4) ibid p7

(5) ibid p8

(6) ibid p8

(7)James Cannon: A Statement on the War, December 1941, Marxist Internet Archive p1

(8)Max Shachtman: The Soviet Union and World War, Marxist Internet Archive 1940

(9) ibid p6

(10) ibid p13

(11Max Shachtman: Against Both War Camps, for the Camp of World Labor!, Marxist Internet Archive 1940 p1-6

(12) ibid p5

(13)Max Shachtman: Fascism and the World War part one, (October 1940) Marxist Internet Archive, p1-7

(14) ibid part two p8

(15) ibid p10

(16) ibid p12

(17)Third Article

(18)Fourth Article

(19)Fifth article p1-7

(20)Sixth article p2

(21) ibid p6

(22)Max Shachtman: Working Class Policy in War and Peace (January 1941) Marxist Internet Archive, p1-20

(23) ibid p13

(24)Max Shachtman: The War Today is what is was Yesterday- Imperialist! (July 1941) Marxist Internet Archive p1-9

(25) ibid p4

(26)Albert Glotzer: Hitler's Attack on Russia, a New Turn in the War, (July 1941) In Marxist Internet Archive p1-15

(27) ibid p8

(28) ibid p8

(29) ibid p8

(30) ibid p10

(31) ibid p15

(32)Max Shachtman: Only Socialism can Bring Peace and Freedom, (February 1944) in Marxist Internet Archive p1-9

(33) ibid p2

(34)J.P. Joubert Revolutionary Defeatism, in Revolutionary History, Marxist Internet Archive p1-26

(35)Leon Trotsky How to Really Defend Democracy, Writings 1939-1940, Pathfinder Press, New York 1974 p344-345

(36) ibid p345

(37)Sam Levy: The Proletarian Military Policy revisited, Revolutionary History, (1988) In Marxist Internet Archive p1-34

(38) ibid p13

(39) ibid p21

(40) ibid p27