TROTSKY AND THE ISSUE OF WAR AND FASCISM

Trotsky in the late 1930's was emphatic that it was not possible to oppose fascism by supporting imperialism.(1) This point was true to the extent that in the 1930's the various 'democratic' imperialist powers like France and the UK supported appeasement of Hitler. However, what he does not refer to is the determination of the working class of Europe to oppose Fascism. Hence his support for Lenin's revolutionary defeatism does not connect with the most advanced consciousness of the proletariat and its desire to reject the expansionism of Fascism. Hence he does not raise the most obvious call which is to oppose the conciliation of the democratic imperialist powers in order to develop the struggle against Fascism. In other words the perspective of revolutionary defeatism can be modified in a principled manner, that is without supporting the national bourgeoisie of the democratic imperialist powers, in order to develop opposition to the forces of fascist reaction. Indeed, what is lacking is an anti-fascist strategy that is opposed to both democratic imperialism and the fascist powers. The Communist International rejects proletarian revolution in the name of anti-fascism, but the result of this approach is to undermine the development of overthrowing capitalism in countries like Spain. The events in Spain indicated that the working class spontaneously connected the opposition to fascism with the development of proletarian revolution. In contrast, the role of the Popular Front acted to ensure that the continuation of bourgeois democracy would be based on the suppression of proletarian revolution. These developments indicated that the issue of opposing fascism in a principled manner meant the encouragement of international proletarian revolution. But Trotsky does not seem to make this conclusion because he considers that this approach would mean the compromising of the attempt to bring about the overthrow of bourgeois democracy by means of revolutionary defeatism in the context of world war. This standpoint is abstract because no class conscious worker in the imperialist democracies would support a policy that could advance the possibility of the military victory of fascism in world war. Instead they would support an anti-fascist approach that would connect the possibility of proletarian revolution in the major powers with the advance of the struggle against Fascism.

Trotsky supports his position by identifying 'anti-fascism' with the opportunist logic of the Communist International of Stalin: “Twenty years after the first imperialist war, which completely destroyed “democratic” illusions, the leaders of the Comintern are trying to prove that capitalist world has radically altered in its nature; that imperialism is no longer the decisive factor on our planet; that world antagonisms are determined not by the predatory interests of monopoly capital, but by abstract political principles, and that the new slaughter of peoples will be a defensive war on the part of innocent, peace loving democracies against the “fascist aggressors”.”(2) Trotsky is right to suggest that the character of the major countries within the world economy has not been changed by the contemporary significance of fascism. But what he has not mentioned in his analysis is the importance of the consciousness of the people of Europe who are anti-fascist. Hence they are critical of the bourgeois politicians of the democratic imperialist powers for appeasing the Fascists. Furthermore, anti-fascism is a mood that could easily become an integral part of the struggle for proletarian revolution. In contrast advocating the military defeat of the bourgeois democracies attracts little support. Hence it would seem to be necessary to introduce modifications in the strategy for opposing the imminent Second World War. Without accommodating to the military aims of the democratic imperialist powers it would be principled to articulate a strategy for the defeat of the fascist countries. Hence it is possible to reject the opportunist strategy of the Communist International whilst still opposing fascism.

Trotsky denies this possibility. Instead he accepts that the Communist International has defined anti-fascism in the most opportunist manner: “This very moment was chosen by the Comintern to abandon the last remnant of internationalism and to proclaim that the task of the new era was an alliance between the proletariat and the decaying imperialist democracies “against fascism”. (3) But the point is that this is not the exclusive form in which anti-fascism can be articulated. We can contend that the Comintern's policy is based on the false reasoning that suggests the democratic imperialist powers will be principled opponents of fascism. Instead, in 1938, France and the UK are trying to appease the expansionist claims of the Fascist powers. Only the working class is a principled opponent of fascism. Hence it needs to develop its independent voice and activity if it is to generate a mass movement based on the ideology of anti-fascism and socialism. Instead of this standpoint, Trotsky proposes the importance of understanding the political activity of imperialism: “A new partition of the world is on the order of the day. The first step in the revolutionary education of the workers must be to develop the ability to perceive beneath the official formulas, slogans and hypocritical phrases, the real imperialist appetites, plans and calculations.”(4) This view is not inaccurate, but it is necessary to recognise that the most dynamic impulse for the re-division of the world is based on the aggressive role of the Fascist powers. Hence developing opposition to the prospect of world war means promoting the anti-fascism of the working class. In this context it is necessary to reject the appeasement of the democratic imperialist powers. At an appropriate moment in time, the working class should support revolutionary war against the fascist states. This task could involve forcing the governments of the bourgeois democracies to promote peoples war against fascism. Indeed, it was necessary, as was proved by the events in France in 1939, to overthrow the bourgeois government that preferred to appease Hitler rather than carry out effective military opposition.

In opposition to these types of arguments, Trotsky contends that the rival imperialist powers are likely to resolve their tensions by war. Hence the assumption is that only revolutionary defeatism as part of a strategy of world revolution can oppose this development: “Imperialism is inevitably and irresistibly heading for to a redivision of the world, corresponding to the changed relation of forces. To prevent the catastrophe imperialism must be strangled. All other methods are fictions, illusions, etc.”(5) The problem with this view is that it seems abstract. People are not motivated by opposing imperialism in the situation of the rise of the aggressive expansionism of the fascist powers. Hence what is required is that the sentiment of anti-fascism be connected to the aim of proletarian revolution. This task does not necessarily require the rejection of proletarian defeatism, but the primary duty will be to generate popular anti-fascist struggle. Thus in the UK this means calling for a Labour government backed up by a peoples militia and workers councils. The arms industry should be placed under workers control and represent the priorities of the workers and soldiers. Obviously, in order to realise this possibility it would have been necessary to develop popular struggle against the formation of a Coalition government, and the result of this situation would have been a government backed by the popular organisations of the working class. In this context, imperialist objectives could have been rejected, and the self-determination of the Empire realised. In contrast, Trotsky can only envisage a Labour government acting on behalf of imperialism because he does not envisage the dynamic role of anti-fascism. To him it is it either total proletarian revolution or continuation of the status quo. Hence he does not appreciate that the anti-fascist mood of the workers in France and the UK meant a situation of radical change was possible in these countries.

Trotsky considered that Czechoslovakia was an imperialist nation, and so he was reticent to call for its national defence against the German plans for its division. This view is part of his assessment that an inter-imperialist world war is likely in the present circumstances, and that the only progressive alternative is that of the united states of Europe.(6) This standpoint is very dogmatic because many people in Europe are concerned about the prospects for Czechoslovakia. It could have been entirely possible to mobilize in favour of a revolutionary war in order to defend the national integrity of Czechoslovakia. But Trotsky denies this prospect in terms of considering the only progressive development being that of international class struggle. He does not seem to recognise that the form that this possibility could have would be to develop anti-fascist war in connection with the struggle for the formation of workers governments in the bourgeois democratic countries. Hence his approach is very rigid and inflexible. It is not based on attempting to connect the aspirations of the working class of Europe with the prospect of anti-fascist war. Instead Trotsky can only support a maximum programme of 'pure' revolutionary struggle. Thus he effectively denies making connections to the existing consciousness of the working class of Europe.

Thus it is not surprising that Trotsky maintains that: “Imperialist democracy is putrefying and disintegrating. A programme of 'defence of democracy' for the advanced countries is a programme of reaction. The only progressive task here is the preparation of the international socialist revolution. Its aim is to smash the framework of the old national state and build up the economy in accordance with geography and technological conditions, without medieval taxes and duties.”(7) This perspective is principled and important in general terms, but it tells us nothing about the tactics and immediate tasks of the revolutionary process. Primarily, what is neglected is the significance of the anti-fascist consciousness of the European working class. The form of the international revolution is the struggle to defeat fascist imperialist expansionism. This means we have to develop tactics that relate to this aim and to the role of anti-fascist moods within the working class. Indeed, in a contradictory manner, Trotsky acknowledges the importance of the struggle to defend democracy and oppose fascism and reaction: “Again, this does not imply an attitude of indifference toward the current political methods of imperialism. In all cases where the counter-revolutionary forces tend to pull back away from the decomposing “democratic” state and towards provincial particularism, towards monarchy, military dictatorship, fascism – the revolutionary proletariat without assuming the slightest responsibility for the “defence of democracy” (it is indefensible!) will meet these counter-revolutionary forces with armed resistance, in order, if successful, to direct its offensive against imperialist democracy.”(8)

Thus in a pragmatic and inconsistent manner, Trotsky admits that one of the tasks of the present period of class struggle is opposition to fascism, including 'critical defence' of bourgeois democracy. The problem is that this standpoint is not elaborated in programmatic terms as an essential part of the process of international revolution. Indeed, Trotsky suggests that this type of struggle is an expression of internal class struggle, as in Spain, and is not relevant in terms of the tasks of inter-imperialist world war. But he is wrong: the issue of imperialist domination of the world indicates the importance of struggle against fascism and in defence of democracy. These issues are not a distraction, or merely of an internal national character, but are instead an essential aspect of the international class struggle. In other words, imperialism is defeated if fascism is overcome. It is not a political diversion, or accommodation to opportunism, to understand that the forthcoming inter-imperialist war will involve the issue of defence of democracy. It is not to apologise for imperialism to recognise that a crucial task will be to uphold democracy against the fascist attempt to suppress it in order to install a repressive regime. This point is understood by the international working class and motivated its willingness to oppose fascism. Instead Trotsky implies that the defence of democracy is only an exceptional aspect of the class struggle. He is wrong to make this dogmatic conclusion. Instead his actual conception of the necessity to defend democracy should be made a central aspect, and not an entirely secondary part, of his programme for action.

However, the fact that the Stalinist bureaucracy has effectively become an agency of democratic imperialism, or that bourgeois democracy is the form of the decline of capitalism, and has a reactionary role as the dominator of colonies, does not mean that democracy has become simply a political farce disguising authoritarian interests. Trotsky is not wrong to make this point, but what he ignores is that the working class has recognised the necessity of defending democracy against fascism. In other words, democracy is more than the political form of the capitalist state; it is also something that is precious and significant for the interests of the working class and the struggle for socialism. This is why the workers are motivated to defend democracy by revolutionary methods, as in Spain. Consequently, the working class is not likely to respond to the outbreak of war in terms of becoming increasingly demoralised. Instead they will develop their determination to oppose fascism despite signs of vacillation within the ruling class. The aim of the Fourth International should be to react to this development and provide leadership of the anti-fascist struggle.

In another article, Trotsky also admitted that the very limitations of Stalinism in upholding a revolutionary approach concerning the question of Fascism had led to the revival of Social Democracy and its standpoint of democracy as the alternative to fascism. (9) He did not accept that this perspective was either principled or effective in its aims, but he accepted that the very illusions of Social Democratic workers had to be taken seriously. The working class knows from the experience of Germany that fascism means the end of democratic rights, and the apparent revolutionary approach of the Comintern proved to be futile in relation to task of successfully opposing Fascism: “Thanks to the ten year criminal policy of the Stalinised Comintern, the political problem presents itself to the consciousness of many million working class masses not in the form of a decisive alternative: the dictatorship of fascism or the dictatorship of the proletariat, but in the form of a more primitive and vague alternative: fascism or democracy.”(10) Trotsky accepts that it is necessary to relate to this sentiment without illusions, and to develop demands that would connect with the aim of defending democracy. However, these demands would be promoted in such a manner that they would prepare the working class to become supporters of more revolutionary tasks: “There can be no thought, of course, of a serious and protracted regeneration of reformism. It is really a question not of reformism in the wide sense of the word but of the instinctive desire of the workers to safeguard their organizations and their “rights”. From this purely defensive and purely conservative position, the working class, in the process of struggle, can and must go over to a revolutionary offensive along the whole line. The offensive, in its turn, must make the masses more susceptible to great revolutionary tasks and consequently to our programme.”(11)

What this comment does not establish is the importance of democratic tasks such as defeating fascism within the programme of revolutionary socialism. Instead it is being argued that fascism will be defeated by the generation of methods of militant class struggle. The precise relationship of the importance of democracy to this perspective is left ambiguous. But he does seem to suggest that the importance of democratic slogans is of a strictly temporary character, and they are to be replaced by more dynamic and revolutionary slogans: “Democratic slogans and illusions cannot be abolished by decree. It is necessary that the masses go through them, and outlive them in the experience of battles.....It is necessary to find the dynamic elements in the present defensive position of the working class; we must make the masses draw conclusions from their own democratic logic, we must widen and deepen the channels of the struggle.”(12) But this view does imply that the role of democratic demands has a merely temporary logic that will be quickly be replaced by a more ambitious and revolutionary approach. We can object and argue instead it is necessary to try to establish the potential and character of the democratic demands. They become the important form of the class struggle, and represent the basis of opposition to fascism and imperialism. However, Trotsky does present the issues of strategy in the following interesting algebraic manner: “We Bolsheviks consider that the real salvation from fascism and war lies in the revolutionary conquest of power and the establishing of the proletarian dictatorship. You socialist workers do not agree to this road. You hope not only to save what has been gained but also to move forward along the road of democracy. Good! As long as we have not convinced you and attracted you to our side, we are ready to follow this road with you to the end. But we demand that you carry on the struggle for democracy not in words but in deeds. Everybody admits - each in his own way – that in the present conditions a “strong government” is necessary. Well then, make your party open up a real struggle for a strong democratic government.”(13) The role of this government would be to democratise parliamentary institutions, and to act as a serious government on behalf of the working class, and so would safeguard democracy and advances towards socialism.

In other words, Trotsky suggests that the mass pressure of the working class, translated into an electoral victory, could represent the possibility of a different manner in which progress towards socialism could be made: “Let your party open up a serious campaign under these slogans; let it arouse millions of workers, let it conquer power through the drive of the masses. This, at any rate, would be a serious attempt of struggle against fascism and war. We Bolsheviks would retain the right to explain to the workers the insufficiency of democratic slogans, we could not take upon ourselves the political responsibility for the Social Democratic government; but we would honestly help you in the struggle for such a government; together with you we would repel all attacks of bourgeois reaction. More than that, we would bind ourselves before you not to undertake any revolutionary actions that go beyond the limits of democracy (real democracy) so long as the majority of the workers have not consciously placed itself on the side of revolutionary dictatorship.”(14) Thus when it is a question of the internal dynamics of the class struggle Trotsky is prepared to discuss the importance of an approach that is based on supporting democracy and opposing fascism. He understands that the tragic debacle in Germany has led to questioning of the credibility of the Comintern and its apparently ineffective politics, or inability to oppose fascism. Hence he understands that the response is for many workers to consider that the most principled basis to reject fascism is by upholding the credibility of democracy. He does not reject this standpoint as an accommodation to bourgeois democracy, and instead accepts that it is necessary to support the defence of democracy against fascism. However, he also suggests that the Marxist forces will independently uphold a programme that aspires to go beyond democracy and advance the process of transition to socialism. However, he also accepts the validity of the minimum programme of the defence of democracy, and considers it to be the starting point for progress being made in terms of the maximum goal of the revolutionary transformation of society.

Thus Trotsky accepts that it could be sectarian to contrast revolutionary aims to the more limited aspirations of the working class to defend democracy against fascism. Instead our starting point should be related to the existing consciousness of the working class. In this context the Marxists will uphold the aims of the working class and attempt to realise them. This means the successful defence of democracy against fascism. Only in this manner will it be principled and credible to raise more ambitious goals concerning transition to socialism. But what is being recognised is that only the successful defence of democracy against fascism will prepare society for the generation of socialism. Trotsky is aware that the working class has become wary about ambitious claims advocating the revolutionary transition to socialism when this standpoint is indifferent to the problem of fascism and the defence of the democratic gains of the working class. Hence if revolutionary politics is to become credible, Marxist forces have to indicate their willingness to defend democracy against the threat of fascism with all the strength and determination they can muster. The boasting and complacency of the Communist International when confronting the threat of fascism must be replaced with an effective minimum programme that can encourage the mobilisation of the working class to defend democracy and so undermine the strength of fascism. Indeed it will be the success of this minimum programme that will create the possibilities to increase the strength of the working class and so enhance the potential for movement towards socialism. In this context, Trotsky is also suggesting that the role of a Social Democratic government with strong working class support can have a limited progressive role in promoting the defence of democracy and undermining the threat of fascism.

Hence Trotsky in this article is making two important tactical innovations. Firstly, he is accepting that under certain political circumstances it is possible that a Social Democratic government can have an important role in defending democracy and opposing fascism. The success of this task will generate the possibility to mobilise the working class in favour of socialism. Secondly, his standpoint implies that a reformist government of an imperialist country could generate the possibility to oppose fascism without the actual overthrow of capitalism and the end of the imperialist character of the economy. His approach implies that under certain circumstances it may be possible to uphold democracy and oppose fascism without the initial transformation of the imperialist character of the country. The ultimate conclusion of his tactical innovation is that it is possible for a country to engage in opposing fascism even though the ultimate revolutionary act of the overthrow of the capitalist and transformation of the imperialist character of the country has not taken place. However this is a tentative conclusion. In general terms, Trotsky argues that a bourgeois democratic imperialist country cannot undertake a principled opposition to fascism. Instead its political actions will be defined by the economic objectives of the given country within the antagonistic capitalist world economy. This is the standpoint adopted by the Manifesto of the Fourth International on war (to be analysed below). Hence there is a political contradiction in the standpoint of Trotsky. On the one hand he admits that revolutionary Marxism has to adapt to the reformist consciousness of Social Democratic influenced workers who want to defend democracy against imperialism. On the other hand, Trotsky's political economy – as already elaborated above – suggests that only after proletarian revolution will a country become committed to opposing fascism. Hence Trotsky has two rival and conflicting perspectives, but the one that is dominant is the view that bourgeois democratic imperialist powers cannot oppose fascism in a principled manner. In other words, on the one hand, Trotsky is suggesting that the internal dynamics of the class struggle involve the defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism. This implies that bourgeois democracy is progressive when compared to the counter-revolutionary threat of fascism. But, on the other hand, in external terms, he is also arguing that bourgeois democracy is dependent on the expansionist imperatives of capitalism as imperialism. In this context, the defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism is a sham and undermines the internationalist class interests of the proletariat. This means to defend democracy implies support for the national aims of the bourgeoisie and represents social-patriotism on the part of the representatives of the working class.

Hence Trotsky has outlined two conflicting perspectives. We have to decide which is more principled and effective than the other. Trotsky has recognised that the working class is motivated by the aspiration to defeat the threat of fascism. In this context he has recognised that they want to defend democracy against fascism. It could be argued that this sentiment is opportunist because it glosses over the reactionary role of the bourgeois democratic state within the world economy dominated by the imperatives of imperialism. However, the strategic point that is recognised by Trotsky is that the successful defence of democracy against fascism will generate the aspiration and impulse to struggle for socialism. In these terms the possibility to also undermine the imperialist character of the bourgeois democratic state will become credible. The alternative is to reject the struggle against fascism in the name of abstract and high-minded revolutionary principles. In practice this second option is not realistic. The only strategy that makes sense is to develop the immediate struggle against fascism in the name of the defence of democracy, and based on the aim of the election of a democratic government. However, this strategy is complicated by the development of Popular Frontism and the explicit defence of bourgeois democracy as the alternative to Fascism. Thus Trotsky reverts to his original approach of proletarian revolution as the only alternative to fascism. He argues in his writings on France: “The historic function of fascism is to smash the working class, destroy its organizations, and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery.”(15) Thus: “The bourgeois regime can be preserved only by such murderous means as these. For how long? Until it is overthrown by proletarian revolution.”(16)

Hence the renewed emphasis is on the original perspective of proletarian revolution as the only answer to fascism. This means confirmation of the standpoint of the Manifesto of the Fourth International concerning War. This document upholds the view that only the overthrow of imperialism enables fascism to be opposed. Instead of Trotsky's previous view that it is possible to defend democracy against fascism, the Manifesto instead upholds a more intransigent revolutionary standpoint: “On the other hand, the exposure of the thoroughly reactionary, putrefied and robber nature of modern capitalism, the destruction of democracy, reformism and pacifism, the urgent and burning need of the proletariat to find a safe path away from imminent disaster put the international revolution on the agenda with renewed force. Only the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the insurgent proletariat can save humanity from a new, devastating slaughter of the peoples.”(17) Thus alongside the economic decline of capitalism is the apparent increasing weakness of democracy and reformism. The assumption is that the only answer to the threat of fascism and world war is the development of the international proletarian revolution. There is no possibility that the defence of democracy would be a credible and principled strategy in these circumstances. The only logical response to the intensification of the contradictions of the world economy is the act of the overthrow of world capitalism. But the problem with this perspective is that whilst it may be accurate in terms of the ability to understand the relationship of the tendencies of economic decline with the increasing threat of world war, it does not smoothly translate theory into practice. The point is that whilst Trotsky may equate the decline of capitalism with the feebleness of democracy, the working class still considers that the central task is to defend democracy against the threat of fascism. Hence the perspective of international revolution as the answers to the limitations of world capitalism seems abstract and over-ambitious. Thus it seems to be more practical to aim to ensure that fascism is defeated nationally. Indeed, this was the standpoint of Trotsky after the immediate victory of Fascism in Germany. But his emphasis on the imperatives of political economy in his Manifesto on War meant these more realistic objectives became rejected. Instead Trotsky offers the stark choice between the continuation of capitalism and world war, or international proletarian revolution. In these terms he effectively rejects any progressive aspect to the defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism and instead in a pessimistic manner he effectively considers the victory of the forces of reaction to be likely under the given circumstances: “The stress of inner contradictions pushes one country after another on the road to fascism, which in its turn, cannot maintain power except by preparing international explosions. All governments fear war. But none of the governments has any freedom of choice. Without a proletarian revolution, a new world war is inevitable.”(18)

Hence Trotsky seems to advocate a strange dialectic of revolution, in which the very victory of reaction creates a progressive logic of change. But, in actuality the continual victory of reaction would generate the development of a balance of class forces that favours the domination of imperialism as the outcome of any world war. Hence the proletariat has an incentive to bring about immediate victory over fascism and reaction, and this prospect is connected to the struggle to defend democracy. But instead of this type of emphasis, Trotsky's concern is with the various aggressive intentions of France, Germany, the UK and USA, which will result in world war. He also outlines how the situation requires defence of the USSR against imperialist aggression. Consequently, what this international analysis lacks is a recognition that the victory of the working class of any important capitalist country, even in the modest terms of defending democracy against fascism, would be an advance that could become the basis to stimulate the very development of international proletarian revolution. Instead Trotsky seems to reject any suggestion of the advance of the class struggle in national terms, because he defines the role of the nation state as reactionary and against the imperatives of the productive forces. Hence he equates any concentration on the significance of the role of the national as effectively a concession to social patriotism. This means he essentially denies the national form of the international proletarian revolution: “A socialist who preaches national defence is a petty bourgeois reactionary at the service of decaying capitalism. Not to bind oneself to the national state in times of war, to follow not the war map but the map of the class struggle, is possible only for that party which has already declared irreconcilable war on the national state in the time of peace. Only by realizing fully the objectively reactionary role of the imperialist state can the proletarian vanguard become invulnerable to all types of social patriotism. This means that a real break with the ideology and policy of national defence is possible only from the standpoint of international proletarian revolution.”(19)

The problem with this view is that it could be utilised in order to suggest that even support for democracy against fascism is an expression of national defencism. Hence Trotsky's approach seems to promote a maximalist approach in opposition to any concessions to social patriotism. What this understanding seems to ignore is that any national victory against fascism and reaction can stimulate the development of international proletarian revolution. Hence Trotsky's view of an adherence to international proletarian revolution without any mediations seems to have questionable strategic value. Thus he was arguing that the primary importance of the world economy of capitalist decline and imperialist expansion meant that the task of international proletarian revolution seem to be more important than the application of the national tactic of defence of democracy against fascist reaction. Indeed, any mention of support for the national state, even if it meant upholding bourgeois democracy against the threat of counter-revolution, seemed to become considered a concession to social patriotism. The only principled strategy was the advocacy of proletarian revolution. In this manner the understanding that national freedom from imperialism was a goal of the class struggle was interpreted as an aim that could only be realised by the overthrow of capitalism. This is why the task of national self-determination within Europe can only be realised by the success of the perspective of the United States of Europe, which cannot be achieved by the methods of the expansionism of imperialism and instead requires the development of international proletarian revolution.

This overall approach seems principled and represents the alternative to the threat of inter-imperialist war in Europe. But Trotsky does not connect this perspective to the possibility of a national struggle in defence of democracy, which he now considers to be opportunist: “The sham of national defence is covered up wherever possible by the additional sham of the defence of democracy. If even now, in the imperialist epoch, Marxists do not identify democracy with fascism and are ready at any moment to repel fascism's encroachment upon democracy; must not the proletariat in case of war support the democratic government against the fascist government?”(20) The assumption is that a bourgeois democratic state would not be supported against the fascist power in a situation of war. But what Trotsky is glossing over is that in order to defend democracy against fascism requires the application of the most popular and militant forms of class struggle. Hence the successful achievement of democratic government under these circumstances is not a typical type of bourgeois state and instead represents the influence of the working class and its organisations. In this context the possibility of popular war against fascism that does not conform to the usual imperatives of imperialist interests and dynamics is possible. In contrast, Trotsky is ignoring this result of successful anti-fascist struggle and suggesting that only with the actual overthrow of capitalism could it become principled to support the involvement of nation state in the inter-imperialist war. This standpoint is another expression of the maximum approach that ignores the consequences of a defence of democracy against fascism within a given nation. Trotsky suggests that the struggle against fascism would not alter the character of society unless a proletarian revolution occurs. Hence he argues: “We defend democracy against fascism by means of the organisation and methods of the proletariat. Contrary to the Social Democracy we do not entrust this defence to the bourgeois state....And if we remain in irreconcilable opposition to the most “democratic” government in time of peace, how can we take upon ourselves even a shadow of responsibility for it in times of war when all the infamies and crimes of capitalism take on a more brutal and bloody form?”(21)

This comment would have general validity if the working class has not engaged in a mass struggle to realise a democratic government that represents its aim of opposing fascism. However, if the working class has successfully been involved in the process of creating a genuinely anti-fascist government then the character of its international aims are also changed. Instead of merely upholding the interests of imperialism and the militaristic attempt to re-divide the world, the major task of the democratic government will be to oppose fascism. Trotsky does not allow for this possibility and instead assumes that: “A modern war between the great powers does not signify a conflict between democracy and fascism but a struggle of two imperialisms for the redivision of the world.”(22) His standpoint is generally correct under usual circumstances in which a typical bourgeois democracy is opposed by the fascist power. This situation would represent the rivalry between contending imperialist countries for markets and expansionist aims. But the situation is changed if the working class has carried out a successful opposition to the threat of fascism and has realised the formation of a genuine government based on the role of popular organisations. This situation would be transitional to socialism. In these circumstances it would be principled to support the government in what would be a genuine form of anti-fascist war. However, Trotsky is generally right to assume that bourgeois democratic states would become more authoritarian in order to carry out the military tasks involved in inter-imperialist war. It would not be principled to support these countries: “Under these conditions, the support by a worker’s party of “its” national imperialism for the sake of a fragile democratic shell means the renunciation of an independent policy and the chauvinistic demoralisation of the workers, that is, the destruction of the only factor that can save humanity from disaster.”(23)

The point is victorious struggle for democracy against fascism and the bourgeois state could result in the formation of a workers government influenced by social democracy. This would mean the political situation was no longer defined by the usual aspects of an inter-imperialist war. Instead it would become principled to proclaim the possibility of the waging of an anti-fascist war. But Trotsky no longer seems to recognise this possibility. This means he conceives the struggle for democracy in very modest means: “The struggle for democracy” in time of war would signify, above all, the struggle for the preservation of the workers press and of workers organisations against unbridled military censorship and military authority. On the basis of these tasks, the revolutionary vanguard will seek a united front with other working class organisations – against its own democratic government – but in no case unity with its own government against the hostile country.”(24) It can be accepted that such a standpoint would apply in usual circumstances. However, the point is to strive to transform the situation and develop a genuinely anti-fascist government. This situation would mean the prospect of ending capitalism had become a real possibility. Under these circumstances the tactic of revolutionary defeatism would be modified. However, Trotsky seems to rule out such a possibility by suggesting that Social Democracy has become an uncritical defender of the interests of imperialism in the period before the actual development of inter-imperialist war. His previous strategy of democratic revolution against fascism seems to be rejected. Instead he is only in favour of proletarian revolution against imperialism. This view is connected to the perspective as being the only principled basis to defend the USSR.

Thus Trotsky suggests that the only principled tactic is that of revolutionary defeatism, and the aspiration for peace can only be defined as not being opportunist when it is connected to the application of this intransigent approach. Hence it would seem that Trotsky is suggesting that the possibility of realising a major class victory before the advent of the Second World War is unlikely. But he seems to contradict this standpoint by also implying that victory against fascism is still possible. He contends: “The slogan of a united front degenerates into a centrist phrase if it is not supplemented under the present conditions by propaganda and practical application of definite methods of struggle against fascism. The united front is needed, first of all, for the creation of local committees of defence. The committees of defence are needed for the building and uniting of detachments of workers militia.”(25) In other words the successful logic of this strategy would be that important victories over fascism are possible before the inter-imperialist war occurs. If this prospect is realised it would dramatically transform the character of the tactics required for the world war. It would be possible to promote the role of anti-fascism on a world stage in opposition to the fascist powers. Only the serious defeat of the proletariat in the class struggle would mean that the situation would correspond to the primary perspective outlined by Trotsky, of revolutionary defeatism. Hence only with serious defeat in the internal class struggle would the following view be necessary as the basis of tactics in the war: “Only a complete and real break with official public opinion on the most burning question of the “defence of the fatherland” signifies a turn, or at least the beginning of a turn from bourgeois positions to proletarian positions.”(26)

Thus it seems that despite Trotsky's outline of an internal strategy to oppose fascism and advance proletarian revolution he is primarily suggesting that inter-imperialist war is likely before any significant victories in the class struggle have been realised. Hence he implies that the world war will be between the bourgeois democratic powers and fascism. The task will be to apply revolutionary defeatism in order to advance the progress of the aim of international proletarian revolution: “Of course, no one can predict just when war will break out and at what stage it will find the building of new parties and of the Fourth International. We must do everything possible to make the preparations for the proletarian revolution move faster than the preparations for a new war. It is very possible, however, that this time also imperialism will overtake the revolution. But even this road, portending great sacrifices and calamities, in no case relives us of the duty of building the new international immediately. The transformation of the imperialist war into the proletarian revolution will proceed all the faster the further advanced our preparatory work will be, the firmer the revolutionary cadres at the beginning of the war....and the more firmly their work is based on correct strategic tactical and organisational principles.”(27)

Thus the implicit assumption is that the internal victory of the working class is unlikely before the advent of inter-imperialist war. This means the war will be between contending imperialist powers that have either a bourgeois democratic or a fascist character. In this context the tactic of revolutionary defeatism will be applicable. Hence the prediction is that the unlikely success of the internal struggles against fascism and capitalism will not alter the dynamics of inter-imperialist contradictions and the imminent possibility of world war. In this context the role of bourgeois democracy will not represent a progressive political role, or the ability to oppose fascism in a principled manner. This is because the prospect of generating a genuine form of democracy that can be defended by the working class is unlikely, and instead the working class should apply the tactic of revolutionary defeatism in the situation of inter-imperialist conflict. The problem with this perspective is that it implies that fascism will continue to be victorious in the internal class struggle of the European countries. This effectively pessimistic perspective ignores the fact that many sections of the international working class aspire to oppose and defeat fascism. However, when it comes to the crunch, Trotsky in each instance of the class struggle rejects this pessimistic perspective and instead adopts a more optimistic approach. For example, in relation to Spain he argues: “We can and must defend bourgeois democracy not by bourgeois democratic means but by the methods of class struggle, which in turn pave the way for the replacement of bourgeois democracy by the dictatorship of the proletariat. This means in particular that in the process of defending bourgeois democracy, even with arms in hand, the party of the proletariat takes no responsibility for bourgeois democracy, does not enter its government, but maintains full freedom of criticism and of action in relation to all the parties of the Popular Front, thus preparing the overthrow of bourgeois democracy at the next stage.”(28) This suggests that if this strategy is adopted that victory over fascism is possible.

But this more optimistic perspective also has important international implications. It implies that countries that have opposed fascism effectively, and advanced the progress of the aim of proletarian revolution, then this country would no longer be a typical bourgeois democratic power with imperialist ambitions. Instead it could be an ally of the USSR in the anti-fascist struggle, and therefore the world situation would not be uniformly reactionary, and no longer would universally represent the contending claims of reactionary imperialist powers. Instead it might be possible to transform the world situation into the opposition between fascism and progressive revolutionary governments. In this context the tactic of revolutionary defeatism would be replaced by the approach of revolutionary war. The various democratic anti-fascist regimes would oppose the most reactionary imperialist powers in alliance with the USSR. This development would not be an apologia for popular frontism because the primary aim of defence of bourgeois democracy is replaced with a regime that is intent on opposing capitalism and imperialism. The point being made is that if principled working class opposition to fascism can be promoted, the result is the generation of exciting new possibilities in international terms. The situation is no longer characterised by decaying bourgeois democracy in opposition to fascism, but is instead defined by the actual principled confrontation of vibrant democracy in opposition to fascism.

However, it could be argued that Trotsky's more pessimistic perspective was realised. The European working class was defeated in the struggle against fascism, and therefore the international situation was characterised by the contradictions between reactionary bourgeois democracy and fascism. In this context the tactic of revolutionary defeatism was applicable. But what is not recognised by this viewpoint is that the working class retained a strong anti-fascist consciousness. It aspired to defeat fascism by military means. Hence it was no longer sufficient to uphold a strategy that had been applicable in world war one to a situation of changing conditions. Instead it was necessary to respond to the views of the working class in a more imaginative manner. This meant calling for the formation of anti-fascist regimes that could conduct serious struggle against the aggression of the fascist imperialist powers. For example, it meant calling for a left wing Labour government in the UK, and for a united front regime in France. This development would not represent capitulation to social patriotism because the major role of these governments would not be to defend bourgeois democracy and imperialism, but instead to engage in revolutionary war against fascism. The failure to realise this perspective meant the formation of a pro-Fascist regime in France, and the creation of the imperialist Churchill government in the UK. Thus the tactic of revolutionary defeatism became necessary because of the missed opportunities to create strong democratic regimes in France and the UK.

In other words the period 1939-40 meant an additional defeat for the international working class because the opportunities to overthrow the reactionary Chamberlain government in the UK was not realised, and the French ruling class capitulated to Hitler. This situation could have been avoided because the working class of these countries was still motivated by anti-fascist consciousness. A political revolution could have been carried out to create democratic regimes orientated to opposing the Fascist threat. Unfortunately the Fourth International did not recognise the potential of this situation because it had a perspective of revolution after the world war had begun. It was misled by dogmatic adherence to the tactics of the First World War, and so failed to recognise the possibilities in the period immediately after hostilities had begun. Trotsky had forgotten the importance of his internal strategy of opposition to fascism, and instead adopted an absolutist international perspective. This viewpoint was based on miscalculations, and as a result the possibility for democratic revolution was not recognised. As a result of the failure of revolutionary leadership, the war did develop as a classical inter-imperialist conflict. But even in this situation the circumstances were very different to that of world war one. Europe was quickly conquered by Germany, and so many countries became oppressed and the aim of national liberation became principled. The task became to unite the national struggle with that of proletarian revolution. Furthermore, the development of conflict between Germany and the USSR meant the task of defence of the USSR was very important. This meant the aim in the UK and the USA was to form workers governments that would primarily promote the overthrow of fascism and generate the advance of international revolution. Thus the application of revolutionary defeatism was modified by these circumstances. It was adapted to the aim of defence of the USSR and the necessity of defeating fascism. The liberation of Europe from Nazi tyranny was also a very important aim.

Consequently the situation was characterised by the need to defeat fascism. The problem was whether this aim could be realised in a principled manner in terms of the advance of the prospects of proletarian revolution, or whether the result would be the consolidation of the economic power of the major bourgeois democratic countries and the USSR. In any eventuality, the standpoint of revolutionary defeatism was of little relevance. The anti-fascist sentiments of the international working class meant there was little support for opposition to the military aims of the bourgeois democratic powers. In 1939, the Fourth International issued a document about the global situation. Did this document in any sense anticipate the issues that would confront the working class, and did it provide a revised version of the 1934 manifesto on war? If we can in some sense indicate that the Fourth International did try to tackle the problems outlined above it will be possible to moderate our criticism of its standpoint.

In the 1939 Manifesto on war, Trotsky explains that the basic causes of the world war are the decaying character of capitalism which has led to military conflict. He explains how the most important aspect is the conflict between France and the UK with Germany and Italy. But what will decide the outcome of the war will be the role of the USA, which is the most powerful capitalist country on the globe. (29) The war is about rival claims for profits and markets. In this situation it is not possible to defend the imperialist nation state: “Official patriotism is a mask for exploiting interests. Class conscious workers throw this mask contemptuously aside. They do not defend the bourgeois fatherland, but the interests of the toilers and the oppressed of their own country and of the entire world.”(30) This comment ignores the fact that millions of workers want to oppose fascism. Hence the crucial issue is how to develop the struggle against fascism without encouraging the development of the military power of imperialism. The manner in which this task could be promoted is by a perspective for the creation of an anti-fascist government based on the support of the working class. Trotsky does not accept the principled nature of this option because to him nothing less than proletarian revolution is credible. He argues that the aim of British and French capitalism is to uphold imperialist ambitions rather than oppose fascism. But the point is that the working class could act to promote anti-fascist aims and so therefore transform the imperialist ambitions of their governments into something more progressive. Instead he insists that bourgeois democracies are becoming more reactionary and repressive, and so cannot in any manner become capable of opposing fascism. Thus, he concludes that the Allies cannot establish something that would represent a progressive alternative to the totalitarianism of Hitler: “The promise of the Allies to create a democratic European federation this time is the crudest of all pacifist lies. The state is not an abstraction but the instrument of monopoly capitalism. So long as the trusts and banks are not expropriated for the benefit of the people, the struggle between states is just as inevitable as the struggle between the trusts themselves.....So long as capitalist property is preserved, a democratic “federation” would be nothing but a worse repetition of the League of Nations, containing all its vices minus only its illusions.”(31)

The point is that Trotsky's view is accurate if the working class does not intervene in order to transform the situation. But instead of basing a perspective on the worst possible scenario, it would be more optimistic and constructive to outline the possibilities connected to the role of the working class. Hence, Trotsky should have outlined a programme of action based on the ability of the working class in the bourgeois democratic powers to begin the development of genuinely popular opposition to fascism. This mass activity could have effectively transformed the inter-imperialist war into popular opposition to the reactionary forces of German and Italian imperialism. Trotsky outlines what could have been possible, and is still possible in relation to his comments about France: “The mighty movement of the French proletariat in June 1936 revealed exceptionally favourable conditions for the revolutionary conquest of power. A French Soviet republic would immediately have gained revolutionary hegemony of Europe, created revolutionary repercussions in every country, rocked the totalitarian regimes and in this way saved humanity from the present imperialist slaughter with its countless victims.”(32) But the point it that it not too late to repeat this prospect for 1936 by mobilising the working class for anti-fascist tasks which connect with the aims of proletarian revolution. Instead of this type of optimistic perspective, Trotsky has accepted the actuality of inter-imperialist war and considers the Social Democrats too opportunist to lead a struggle against the imperialism of the bourgeois democratic powers. This is true, but surely it should be the strategy of the Fourth International to revive militant anti-fascist struggle?

But he does seem to suggest a type of optimistic strategy when he contends: “It is possible to save the trade unions in only one way: by transforming them into fighting unions which will set as their goal victory over capitalist anarchy and imperialist banditry. The trade unions will play a paramount role in building socialist economy, but the preliminary condition for this is the overthrow of the capitalist class and the nationalization of the means of production. The trade unions can escape burial beneath the ruins of war only if they take the road of socialist revolution.”(33) These comments indicate that Trotsky still has a glimmer of hope that internal class struggle could transform the present situation of inter-imperialist war. But this understanding needs to be extended in order to outline a coherent programme of opposition to fascism. Instead because of his concern about opportunist capitulation to bourgeois democracy, he does not elaborate this vital task. Unfortunately he ignores this necessity of an anti-fascist strategy because he is convinced that it is the imperialist war that represents the context and potential for proletarian revolution: “If the bourgeois regime comes out of the war with impunity, every revolutionary party will suffer degeneration. If the proletarian revolution conquers, these conditions that produce degeneration will disappear.”(34) He is suggesting that all the traditional organisations of the working class have become opportunist and only under the leadership of the Fourth International will revolutionary success be achieved. Given the present immediate tiny size of this organisation it will take many years for the Fourth International to become a credible leadership of the working class. Indeed he is implying that the working class is not yet ready to engage in ambitious forms of class struggle because of recent defeats: “In the last twenty years, it is true, the proletariat has suffered one defeat after another, each graver than the proceeding one, become disillusioned with its old parties, and met the war undoubtedly in depressed spirits. One should not, however, overestimate the stability of durability of such moods, events created them; events will dispel them.”(35)

This standpoint was possibly a false estimation of the political situation. Instead the very outcome of war promoted within the working class a sense of determination to oppose fascism. The dilemma was how to translate this sentiment into principled political aspirations in order to develop immediate struggle against fascism without also simultaneously strengthening bourgeois democracy. But Trotsky defines the possibilities of revolution in a long-term perspective, and denies the possibilities of immediate victory, and instead suggests the present mood is one of patient resignation: “The peoples are suffering the present war without any longer believing in it, without expecting anything more from it than new chains.”(36) However, he does not suggest that the aim should be to raise morale in terms of developing the potential for anti-fascist struggle by the working class. Instead in a categorical manner, he argues: “But isn't the working class obliged to fight 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 an 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.....But when the whole train is plunging into an abyss, the distinction between decaying democracy and murderous fascism disappears in the face of the collapse of the entire capitalist system.”(37)

The reasoning of Trotsky's approach is false. The point is that if the proletariat remains subordinate to the capitalist class within the bourgeois democracies it will support the promotion of a pro-imperialist policy. However, if it develops its own form of militant anti-fascism this situation will mean that it becomes possible to establish a principled anti-fascist type of military struggle. It would be the very political activity of the working class within the bourgeois democratic regime that would mean the question of defence of democracy had become important and principled. In this context a definite difference would develop between fascism and the defence of democracy in societies where the influence of the working class had become stronger. If the working class remained passive, and subordinated to democratic imperialism, then the prospect of genuine anti-fascist struggle would not materialise. But the promotion of the influence of the working class in anti-fascist terms would mean that genuine and democratic struggle would become possible without the working class being subordinated to the interests of the imperialist power. Indeed Trotsky accepts that there is a mood of anti-fascism within the working class, but he denies that this means the possibility to develop genuine anti-fascist struggle: “By his victories and bestialities, Hitler provokes naturally the sharp hatred of workers the world over. But between the legitimate hatred of workers and the helping of his weaker but not less reactionary enemies is an unbridgeable gulf. The victory of the imperialists of Great Britain and France would be not less frightful for the ultimate fate of mankind than that of Hitler and Mussolini. Bourgeois democracy cannot be saved. By helping their bourgeoisie against foreign fascism, the workers would only accelerate the victory of fascism in their own country. The task posed by history is not to support one part of the imperialist system against another but to make an end of the system as a whole.”(38) This perspective ignores the possibilities created by the very anti-fascist mood of the working class in the bourgeois democratic countries. They can translate this mood into effective action that results in the formation of a regime based on the support of the workers. In this context the conflict is no longer between bourgeois democracy and fascism but is instead a conflict based on the opposition of the popular democracy of the working class against the counter-revolutionary regimes of Italy and Germany. Trotsky's approach is based on the understanding that the war has nothing to do with the interests of the working class. But this is not true. Fascism destroys the organisations of the working class, and so its military and political defeat corresponds with the standpoint of the proletariat. This fact is precisely why it is possible to develop anti-fascist war based on the popular participation of the working class. Instead Trotsky rules out this possibility and he can only envisage the conflict between bourgeois democracy and the fascist imperialist regimes. If his view of reality is correct, then his strategy of world revolution is principled. But his perspective ignores and underestimates the importance of the anti-fascist mood within the working class. It is this situation which should be the basis of the development of a perspective to oppose both fascism and imperialism.

In other words Trotsky considers that in the present the generation of anti-fascist struggle could not become independent of the imperatives of bourgeois democracy and imperialism. Hence its development would effectively be unprincipled and opportunist. Instead only a strategy of revolutionary defeatism is the expression of the political independence of the world working class. But this approach is abstract because of the fact that many millions of workers do want to engage in opposing fascism. Hence it is necessary to develop a programme of action based on this point. The crucial point is how to oppose fascism without also accommodating to the interests of imperialism. This dilemma can be resolved by developing a successful anti-fascist struggle, and this means the establishment of a principled democratic government. In contrast Trotsky is effectively supporting the view that only after a number of years will anti-war sentiment develop that eventually becomes an expression of the necessity of revolutionary struggle to oppose capitalism. This approach may be valid if it was not for the fact that the international working class generally considers that its task is to oppose the fascist form of imperialism in order to promote the struggle for socialism. Trotsky ignores this sentiment in order to uphold an orthodox Leninist approach to world war. The problem is that the issues of world war two are not merely a repeat of those of world war one. The First World War did not involve the issue of fascism, and because of this revolutionary defeatism was the most applicable response. But world war two was about opposing fascism, and this was how the character of the war was conceived by the world working class. Consequently, Trotsky's approach was not in accordance with the sentiments of popular consciousness. This was why his standpoint had limitations. He could have rectified this with the addition of an anti-fascist dimension to his approach. However his position was influenced by the fact that internal anti-fascist struggles had been defeated, and so it seemed that a different perspective was required in order to promote proletarian revolution. The major problem with this standpoint was that it logically meant the forces of bourgeois democracy could monopolise the political standpoint of opposing fascism, and as a result the working class became subordinated to the democratic form of imperialism. It could only have overcome this development by advancing a proletarian form of anti-fascist international struggle. Trotsky seemed to be oblivious to this issue and instead advocated a maximum programme of demands. Hence his programme did not connect with the existing consciousness of the working class, which was connected to the importance of struggle against fascism. In actuality, the very German expansion into Europe meant the programme of the Fourth International became related to the task of opposing fascism.

However, Trotsky did not alter his approach even after the defeat of France by Germany. Instead he comments: “Hitler's victory over France has revealed completely the corruption of imperialist democracy, even in the sphere of its own tasks. It cannot be “saved” from fascism. It can only be replaced by proletarian democracy. Should the working class tie up its fate in the present war with the fate of imperialist democracy, it would only assure itself a new series of defeats.”(39) This a dogmatic view that refuses to recognise that the working class of France could have been mobilised against the German invasion of 1940. It was the French bourgeoisie that accepted the German occupation as an alternative to the prospect of the mobilisation of the working class against fascism and capitalism. Hence it was in 1940 that the working class could have advanced under revolutionary leadership against both the French bourgeoisie and German imperialism. Trotsky is indifferent to this prospect because he can only comprehend the decaying character of French capitalism, and so cannot recognise revolutionary possibilities. Hence he contends in the most pessimistic manner that: “In order to create a revolutionary situation say the sophists of social patriotism, it is necessary to deal Hitler a blow. To gain a victory over Hitler it is necessary to support the imperialist democracies. But if for the sake of saving the “democracies” the proletariat renounce independent revolutionary policies, just who would utilize a revolutionary situation arising from Hitler's defeat? There has been no lack of revolutionary situations in the last quarter of a century. But there has been lacking a revolutionary party capable of utilizing a revolutionary situation.”(40)

But what Trotsky seems to have forgotten, is that the very process of mobilising the working class in anti-fascist terms is also an expression of the development of proletarian revolution. The working class are in the mood to oppose fascism, they will fight the forces of German imperialism, and so a party that proposes an anti-fascist strategy will attract popular support. Trotsky rejects this standpoint because he defines it as opportunist, or social-patriotic, but this means he ignores the fact that the working class will defend the bourgeois democratic country against fascist invasion. This task can become principled and effective if the importance of opposing German invasion is recognised by the revolutionary party. Trotsky rejects this perspective because in a dogmatic manner he can only conceive of revolutionary defeatism being an effective tactic. Yet advocacy of this tactic is irrational because he also maintains that: “In the defeated countries the position of the masses will immediately become worsened in the extreme. Added to social oppression is national oppression, the main burden of which is likewise borne by the workers. Of all the forms of dictatorship, the totalitarian dictatorship of a foreign conqueror is the most intolerable.”(41) He has just outlined an important reason why the working class should act to militarily oppose fascism. If the workers do not fight, the result will be the most intense form of national oppression. The regime of bourgeois democracy will be replaced by the most severe form of repression. Hence the working class, in the name of democracy and socialism, have principled reasons to act to reject the forces of fascist expansion. This means the role of the revolutionary party should be to organise a workers militia, and an army to oppose the forces of fascist invasion. If victory over the German army is obtained this would mean a tremendous impulse to the development of the international struggle against fascism and for socialism. But defeat meant the imposition of Nazi tyranny over Europe.

Unfortunately, in a pessimistic manner, Trotsky accepts this situation of German invasion as unavoidable, and therefore he can only envisage the possibility of an uprising of conquered peoples. This perspective is considered to be more principled than the view which suggests support for democratic imperialism against fascism: “Consequently, the task of the revolutionary proletariat does not consist of helping the imperialist armies create a “revolutionary situation”, but of preparing, fusing, and tempering its international ranks for revolutionary situations of which there will be no lack.”(42) But what he underestimates is the possibility that severe repression can undermine the promotion of struggle against tyranny. This is precisely why it was the Allies that acted to 'liberate' the countries under the domination of the German army. It would have been more promising if the working class had led a process of popular war against fascism. In this context defeat would not have undermined the possibility of future struggles. Instead the Fascists conquered passive countries, and ensured that no possibility of revolutionary uprising could occur. Hence, it required the renewal of the Allied war effort to bring about emancipation. The possibility of proletarian revolution was seriously restricted in this situation.

Trotsky had a different perspective in the mid 1930's. His action programme for France is based on the importance of the mobilisation of the working class against the threat of fascism and world war. (43) He outlines a revolutionary programme of demands and outlines how the successful implementation of this policy would advance the aim of opposing the threat of world war: “Only the victory of the revolutionary toilers of France can eliminate all possibility of imperialist war and arouse the enslaved peoples of Europe and the Colonies.”(44) This implies that the working class will have an active role in mobilising against the threat of fascist expansion, as well as rejecting the imperialist aims of the French bourgeoisie. Trotsky also outlines how the programme of socialism is inseparably connected to the defence of democracy against the Fascist threat to impose an authoritarian state: “Meanwhile, as long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie.”(45) This perspective would involve defending a Constituent Assembly and a socialist government against the bourgeoisie. In other words the successful defence of bourgeois democracy is a vital aspect in defeating the forces of fascism and advancing the possibility of socialism. If this perspective is elaborated in international terms it could mean that the defence of bourgeois democracy in conditions of world war is not ruled out in terms of the principled extension of the struggle to defeat fascism. However, Trotsky is reluctant to make this conclusion and instead limits his foreign policy recommendations to defence of the USSR in a situation of war.

Trotsky considers that the situation in France is vital. If the working class can defeat the threat of fascism the possibility to avoid world war might still be realised: “The general situation in France puts the entire conscious labour movement before a task of short perspective: either the proletariat will in the course of six months, a year, or possibly two years destroy fascism and take a tremendous step towards forward all the way to the struggle for power, or it will itself be destroyed and all of Europe will become the arena for fascist tyranny and war.”(46) The internal perspective of Trotsky begins to change in relation to the continued right wing trajectory of the Communist International. It is noted by him that the French Communist party interprets the united front as strictly meaning the defence of bourgeois democracy, and the relegation of the importance of the tasks to promote socialism. (47) However, to some extent the right-wing trajectory of the Stalinists is offset by a left-wing evolution of the Socialist party. This development means that it may still be possible to maintain the principled character of the united front against fascism.(48) Trotsky definitely starts to revise his perspectives in relation to the political consequences of the Stalin-Laval pact of 1935, when the USSR agrees to support the defence of French imperialism. The result of this pact is that Trotsky emphatically rejects any defence of bourgeois democracy in the situation of world war: “He is lost who abandons the position of class struggle and of international revolution and who begins to seek safety outside of the revolutionary struggle against one's own government within one's own country. Today, the betrayal will be covered by the plea of the need to “save peace”; tomorrow when war breaks out, nevertheless that betrayal will be perpetuated in order to save democracy or the USSR. But neither peace nor democracy nor the USSR can be saved by the surrender of the French proletariat.”(49)

This pact was effectively justified on the basis that bourgeois democracy was more progressive than fascism. Hence it was being suggested by the Stalinists that the working class of France should defend their nation against Nazi Germany. Trotsky rejected this reasoning as opportunist, but this meant he also rejected any implication of the defence of democracy against fascism as an expression of class collaboration. The only principled policy that represented the class interests of the French working class was expressed by revolutionary defeatism: “Should the revolutionary movement in France, in the event of war, gain such force as to directly threaten the military machine of the bourgeoisie and imperil its alliance with the USSR, it would imply that the French proletariat is capable of seizing power at the height of the struggle. Should they be restrained in such a situation? Let them say it. Will we run the risk of defeat? Obviously.”(50) This perspective meant that Trotsky implied that even working class mobilisation against imperialist war was unprincipled if it did not connect with the overthrow of capitalism. Thus he seemed to rule out the possibility of anti-fascist mobilisation unless it was explicitly related to the tactic of revolutionary defeatism. The defence of democracy against fascism became considered to be an expression of opportunist social-patriotism. All forms of national defence are defined as representing the interests of capital. But this view means that anti-fascist mobilisation in defence of democracy is also considered in these terms. Thus Trotsky effectively rejects the role of the united front, and instead only a tactic of revolutionary defeatism under the leadership of the Fourth International is principled: “The struggle against war is unthinkable without struggle against one's own imperialism. The struggle against imperialism is unthinkable without the struggle against its agents and allies, the reformists and Stalinists. It is necessary ruthlessly to purge the working class organizations, both political and trade union, of the social patriotic traitors to the working class, whether be their names: Leon Blum or Thorez or Jouhaux or Monmousseau.”(51)

Thus Trotsky has become the advocate of the most dogmatic tactics. He is rejecting any possibility of the united front, defence of democracy and opposition to fascism, on the basis of the most narrow revolutionary principles. But this means his perspective is based on the development of world war as the only basis for the overthrow of capitalism. The result of his standpoint means that he effectively denies the differences between bourgeois democracy and fascism, and considers the defence of the former against the latter as opportunist. Hi sense of perspectives has truly been dis-orientated by the betrayals of the Comintern. The result is an ultra-left stance that is based on an implicit pessimism about the internal dynamics of the class struggle in countries like France. In an article written two years before the outbreak of the world war, Trotsky outlines why his perspective of world revolution is now dependent on the development of inter-imperialist conflict: “But can it not be hoped that resistance will come from the depths, from the working masses, through general strikes, insurrections, revolutions? Theoretically this is not excluded. But if hopes and fears are not to be mistaken for reality, such a perspective must be regarded as not very probable. The working class of the whole world are weighed down by the terrible defeats which they suffered in Italy, Poland, China, Germany, Austria, Spain, partly in France, and a number of smaller countries. The old internationals – the Second, the Third, and the Trade Union international, are closely tied to the governments of the democratic states and participate actively in the preparation of “war against fascism”.....In order to rise against militarism, the masses would first have to reject the tutelage of the official internationals. This is not a simple task. It will not be accomplished in a day or a month. At present, in any event, the political awakening of the proletariat proceeds more slowly than the preparation of the new war.”(52)

In other words Trotsky is suggesting that the strength of reformism and Stalinism has meant that the prospects for internal victories of the proletariat has been defeated. Only on the international scale of world war can the basis of revolution be revived. This means that when war occurs it will be the connection of opposition to this situation combined with proletarian unrest that will generate the possibilities for the success of the tactic of revolutionary defeatism. In this context any conception of war to defend democracy or oppose fascism is diversion from the major task of connecting the success of revolutionary defeatism with the progress of class struggle. Any other approach only maintains capitalism: “As justification for their militaristic and chauvinistic policies, the Second and Third Internationals propagate the idea that the new war will have as its mission the defence of freedom and culture against the fascist aggressors.....Such a classification evokes doubt even from a purely formal point of view..... Stalin's political system more and more approaches the system of Hitler. In France, fascism sweeps democracy away even before the war. The “People’s Front” governments are in any event doing everything within their power to facilitate such a change. In the present world system it is not easy to separate the wolves from the lambs.”(53)

There is much truth in what Trotsky argues. But what is omitted from his analysis is the fact that the international working class wants to oppose fascism. It is waiting for leadership and guidance in relation to this task. Hence if Trotsky was to connect with the dynamics of the class struggle he would outline a strategy for developing the struggle against fascism. Instead of providing this type of programme, Trotsky is more concerned to predict that many democratic regimes will become fascist in order to carry out the military demands of the world war. (54) This viewpoint enables him to argue that bourgeois democracy cannot wage a principled struggle against fascism, but what is not being elaborated is a conception of how the international working class could promote a popular struggle in order to defeat the expansionism of Fascism. Instead of elaborating this perspective, which would be the only basis to ensure that world war does not happen, Trotsky can only envisage that war is the basis of revolution: “I am little inclined to share the hope that the proletariat will be able at the necessary moment to resist with force the commencement of war operations. On the contrary, in the months of approaching war danger as well as during the first period of war, the masses will be dominated by centripetal, patriotic tendencies with the force of a natural reflex.....But the further progress of war, with its train of destitution, savagery and despair, will of necessity not only regenerate but also develop in the extreme all frictions, antagonisms and centrifugal tendencies, which sooner or later will find their expression in insurrection and revolution.”(55)

Trotsky outlines with general accuracy the future development of the world war, including the military successes of Germany. He is also aware that the intervention of the USA is crucial for the outcome of the war. However, his major flawed prediction is to envisage the rapid demise of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy. He glosses over the fact that even the Soviet people would prefer Stalinism to the alternative of fascist tyranny. But Trotsky's major limitation is to consider that proletarian revolution would be the dominant outcome of the conflict. What he ignored was the very fact that because anti-fascist struggle did not occur in the period 1938-1940 this meant the world war became inevitable between the dominant capitalist powers in economic and political conflict. This development meant that ultimately the outcome of the war would not be proletarian revolution, but was instead the domination of the USA and USSR. The possibility of proletarian revolution was missed in France 1939 when the defeatist national bourgeoisie could have been replaced by a revolutionary regime. The same point could be made about the UK. In this context fascist imperialism would have been opposed by democratic anti-fascist regimes. This would have meant that the whole character of the conflict would have been different; it would have been an example of democracy versus fascism. In this context the ability of the USA and the USSR to influence the outcome of the war would also have been undermined. Instead they would have had to adapt to the anti-fascist sentiment of the popular forces. Furthermore, the anti-fascist struggle would have encouraged popular revolutions against the Nazi occupations in Europe, and in this context the possibility to connect anti-fascism with the proletarian revolution would have emerged. This perspective is more precise and plausible than Trotsky's abstract approach based on the conception of revolutionary defeatism.

However the failure to develop anti-fascist struggle meant the world war represented the great power rivalry depicted by Trotsky. But he underestimated the ability of the USA and the USSR to dictate the situation. This was because he completely underestimated the durability of the Stalinist regime. But Trotsky did realise that Germany could not succeed in its expansionist aims. This is why his hopes were on the German revolution promoting revolution in Europe. Instead the occupation of Germany by the USA and USSR undermined any possibility of revolution, and Germany was partitioned. In the most bureaucratic manner capitalism was overthrown in the East, whilst capitalism was retained in the West. Hence Trotsky's post 1935 perspective was not realised. He would have been better advised to try to re-elaborate his anti-fascist approach for the situation in 1939-40. Ultimately, he underestimated the durability of capitalism to survive the Second World War. He believed that a repetition of the First World War would occur. This meant he did not recognise the significance of the intervention of the USA, which was greater than that at the time of the First World War. But he also did not anticipate the actual situation, in which the working class was unable to overcome the strong alliance of the USA and USSR.

However, Trotsky did not entirely reject the approach of anti-fascism in the late 1930's. He comments: “One can fight against fascism only on the basis of a real, serious revolutionary social programme capable of rallying not only the proletariat but also the oppressed masses of the petty bourgeoisie.”(56) The problem was that he did not apply this understanding to the period 1939-40 and instead emphasised his perspective of revolution based on the development of world war. In 1939, Trotsky still considered that a pre-revolutionary situation could develop.(57) The problem is that he outlined this possibility in terms of industrial unrest and did not outline an anti-fascist strategy that could become the basis to mobilise the working class in relation to the imminent possibility of world war. This inability to connect anti-fascism to the process of proletarian revolution meant that Trotsky projected the potential for this perspective onto the actual dynamics of world war. This meant he underestimated the counter-revolutionary strength of the contending social forces involved, and did not realise that an opportunity to establish popular workers governments had been missed in the 1939-40 period. Trotsky never overcame the disorientation in his perspective caused by the continued opportunist degeneration of the Stalinist bureaucracy in terms of its pact with French imperialism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Leon Trotsky: 'A Fresh Lesson' selected writings 1938 p27

(2)'A Fresh Lesson' ibid p52

(3) ibid p53

(4) ibid p56

(5) ibid p58

(6) ibid p63-64

(7) ibid p65

(8) ibid p65

(9)Leon Trotsky: Our Present Tasks, in Selected Writings 1933-34 p136-139

(10) ibid p137

(11) ibid p137

(12) ibid p138

(13) ibid p138

(14) ibid p139

(15)Leon Trotsky: On France, Pathfinder Press, New York 1979 p30

(16) ibid p30

(17)Leon Trotsky: War and the Fourth International, Selected writings 1933-34 p299-300

(18) ibid p300

(19) ibid p305

(20ibid p306

(21) ibid p306-307

(22) ibid p307

(23) ibid p307

(24) ibid p307

(25) ibid p324

(26) ibid p328

(27) ibid p328-329

(28)Leon Trotsky: The Spanish Revolution, Pathfinder Press New York 1973 p257

(29)Trotsky: Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution, in Selected Writings 1939-40 op cit p182-190

(30Ibid p191

(31) ibid p196-197

(32) ibid p206

(33) ibid p213-214

(34) ibid p215

(35) ibid p217

(36) ibid p218-219

(37) ibid p221

(38) ibid p221

(39)Trotsky: We Do Not Change Course, in Selected Writings 1939-40 p296

(40) ibid p297

(41) ibid p297

(42) ibid p299

(43)Trotsky Action Programme for France, in Selected Writings 1934-35 p21-32

(44) ibid p28

(45) ibid p31

(46) ibid p35

(47) ibid p65

(48)The Way out, ibid p81-88

(49)Stalin has signed his death certificate ibid p293-294

(50) ibid p297-298

(51)Trotsky: An Open Letter to the workers of France ibid p312

(52)Trotsky: On the Threshold of a New World war, selected writings 1936-37 p383

(53) ibid p383

(54) ibid p385

(55) ibid p392

(56)Questions and Answers ibid p410

(57) ibid p470-471