TED GRANT AND REVOLUTIONARY DEFEATISM

Ted Grant outlined the perspectives of the Workers International League on the issue of the second world war in the article ‘Preparing for Power’. He argues that what has become a conflict that has effects within the whole world will result in revolutions: “But the developments which have given the war its universality have at the same time far from strengthening imperialism, weakened it in the extreme. The very contradictions which led the imperialists to seek a way out in war will lead directly to revolutions. It is no longer a question of attempting to estimate where the weak link in the chain of capitalism might be. There are no strong links. There is not a single country, not even mighty America, which has the possibility of escaping terrific social convulsions and even civil war. Just as no one could state for certain where the war would begin, so it is with social revolution. It may be Japan, China, Germany, the continent of Europe, Britain or even a colonial revolt in Africa. But just as the war has to spread inevitably throughout the world, so will the social revolution spread from country to country and continent and continent and even at a greater speed.”(Ted Grant: Preparing for Power, Marxist Internet Archive p2) This comment is an example of a sense of optimism that tries to deny the difficulties of the process of revolutionary transformation during the second world war and instead emphasises a rigid conception of the connection between the development of inter-imperialist conflict and the possibility of social change. In other words this standpoint is based on an emphasis of a dogmatic connection between the apparent objective factor of the radicalising role of the war which ignores the importance of the issues that has motivated the participation of the people of the various countries that are involved in the war. For example, Grant ignores the importance of the actions of the French bourgeoisie who have collaborated with the German fascists in order to achieve the counterrevolutionary creation of a new reactionary regime. He also underestimates the anti-fascist sentiments of the people of Britain and the USA who conceive of the situation in terms of the role of an anti-fascist war.(But in a contradictory manner he also accepts this aspect of the conflict in polemic with the Revolutionary Socialist League, as will be discussed) Hence he ignores the impact of the reactionary role of fascism and the opposing role of the so-called democratic powers which means that the character of the war seems to have achieved ideological dimensions of the struggle of fascism versus democracy. This aspect complicates the realisation of a perspective of revolutionary opposition to the various countries engaged in an inter-imperialist war. Instead it is necessary to accept the importance of the aspects of fascism and democracy if a perspective is to be elaborated that is able to recognise the complexity of the situation and so in that manner develop what would be a realistic and non-dogmatic approach that is able to understand how the situation has changed when compared to the first world war. Instead Grant seems to be implying that the war is similar to that which occurred between 1914-18 in terms of being an inter-imperialist war, and so the approach that needs to be adopted is essentially identical which is to transform the war into becoming a revolutionary struggle for proletarian power. Obviously, this perspective has to be accepted as being of crucial importance in this situation, but what also has to be understood is the different significance of the domination of Europe by the fascist imperialist powers and the defensive situation of the democratic imperialist countries and the USSR. In this context the aim should be to establish the political conditions for the carrying out of a genuine anti-fascist war by the realisation of the increasing power and influence of the working class within the democratic imperialist countries. In this context the aim should be for the election of officers of the armies of the USSR, UK and USA, and the establishing of the principles of what would be genuine anti-fascist war. But instead of this standpoint Grant is content to suggest that the role of inter-imperialist conflict is somehow monolithic and uniform and so the approach that should be adopted is the perspective of Lenin to transform the inter-imperialist war into a situation of the aspiration to overthrow capitalism in all of the countries involved in the second world war. But this standpoint ignores the complicating aspect of the role of fascism which means that tactics should be adapted to this situation, and indeed Grant accepts the importance of this point when he elaborates his views in terms of a reply to the comrades of the Revolutionary Socialist League.

The point being made is that the character of the war has been modified by the importance of the aspect of the struggle of fascist imperialist powers against the bourgeois democratic imperialist countries. This means that tactics have to be different in relation to these diverse circumstances. In other words, the victory of fascism over the bourgeois democracies imposes a form of intensely repressive and authoritarian regimes that means the working class is deprived of all of its abilities to organise and influence society. But in the bourgeois democracies an aspect of their struggle with the fascist powers is that even in an unintended manner the democratic ability of the working class to organise and act in a political manner is being upheld. However, the war of the democratic capitalist powers is still imperialist in the sense that it is primarily about the aim of imposing domination over the fascist countries and so enhancing a process of economic and political influence in international terms. Hence there is a contradiction which the working class has to try and resolve in a progressive manner. This possibility can be advanced by the conscious ability of the workers to try and enhance the level of democracy within society in terms of establishing the control of the imperialist armies by the soldiers and the struggle to achieve a worker’s government. The effectiveness of this process will define to what extent the war of the democratic bourgeois powers is becoming genuinely supportable. In other words, the position adopted is similar to that which Trotsky adopted in relation to the Spanish civil war. Without giving any confidence in the Republican bourgeois governments the attitude of the working class should be to defend this administration against the reactionary attempts of the fascist forces to overthrow it. This will mean the creation of workers militias and the role of the trade unions in the promotion of a form of popular defence against the threat of the establishment of the reactionary power of the fascists. In a similar manner the working class should in a critical and independent manner defend the bourgeois democratic powers and the USSR against the threat of fascist counterrevolution. This would not mean the undermining of the independent class interests of the working class and instead means that the workers would act in a organised manner to uphold the aim of the overthrow of the forces of fascism in order to uphold the realisation of the aims of democracy and socialism. Such a development would not mean a form of class collaboration and instead would imply that the workers of the bourgeois democratic powers were acting in terms of the possibility to connect the aims of national defence with that of the progress of democracy and socialism. In no sense should this approach mean support for the reactionary aims of the democratic imperialist powers. Instead the perspective that is being advanced is the transformation of what is an inter-imperialist war into a process of a popular war to bring about the defeat of the fascist imperialist powers. Hence as an integral aspect of this development it should be feasible and possible to establish genuine democratic control of the army and to advance the prospects for the formation of a worker’s government. This means that within the context of the military conflict the internal situation of the bourgeois democratic powers is being transformed, and the result is the creation of the possibility of the development of what is a genuine anti-imperialist war that is based on the increased influence of the working class within society.

In the ‘Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian Revolution’ (Leon Trotsky Collected works 1939-40, New York, Pathfinder Press 1973 p183-222) Trotsky seems to uphold what seems to be a rigid revolutionary approach in terms of defining the situation in terms of the development of an inter-imperialist war. He comments: “Official patriotism is a mask for the 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.”(p191) And this view is connected to the dismissal of any defence of democracy which is only an expression of the interests of various imperialist countries, but he is also aware of the reactionary objectives of the fascist powers. Hence there is a tension in the approach of Trotsky that is based on the understanding of the authoritarian intentions of the fascist powers and yet cannot support in any manner the role of the democratic imperialist powers because of their own reactionary objectives. But he simultaneously calls for the bourgeois state of presumably the democratic powers to train the workers in the tasks of achieving the ability to understand the technology of the process of conflict. This implies the call for the workers to be able to achieve control of the army, but for what end? Surely this process would imply the ability to transform what has been an imperialist war into a struggle for both democracy and socialism. But instead of this logical conclusion, Trotsky comments that: “At the same time we do not forget for a moment that the war is not our war. In contradistinction to the Second and Third Internationals, the Fourth International builds its policy not on the military fortunes of the capitalist states but on the transformation of the imperialist war into a war of the workers against the capitalists, on the overthrow of the ruling classes of all countries, on the world socialist revolution.”(p222) Hence there is a tension in the position of Trotsky in that on the one hand he emphasises the importance of the proletarian military policy and the possibility of democratic control of the armies of the democratic imperialist powers by the working class, and on the other hand still upholds the traditional approach of revolutionary defeatism and opposition to all the countries involved in the second world war, except the USSR. This contradiction of his position can be resolved if we accept that in some sense the very success of the proletarian military policy implies the possibility of the development of a popular war of the people against fascism. If the working class is unable to achieve any aspect of influence in the conduct of the military struggle of the bourgeois democratic powers, then it could be said that the character of the war remains that of an inter-imperialist conflict. But the most principled approach would be to try and achieve the ability of the working people to be able to influence the objectives of the inter-imperialist war and so transform the situation into a genuine people’s war with fascism. But for this possibility to occur would require the development of the effective influence of the working class within society. In contrast the position of traditional revolutionary defeatism seems to imply that nothing can be realised except in terms of the actual overthrow of capitalism by the working class. This view implies that the workers remain subordinated to capitalism if the system continues to be dominant. What this perspective ignores is that the workers can enhance their social power within the existing system and so create a more favourable balance of class forces that enables them to achieve the ability to be impose a different and more radical policy in relation to the conduct of the war. This means the generation of the influence of anti-fascist objectives such as the progress of genuine democracy and increases the possibility of the realisation of socialism. If the ruling class opposes this type of development, they would be shown to be pro fascist in their objectives, and so would be discredited. But Trotsky and the WIL seem not to recognise this dynamic and instead continue to rigidly define the conflict in terms of an inter-imperialist war. In an important sense they are right, the war has begun as an inter-imperialist antagonism, but the point is that it has the possibility to become a genuine struggle against fascism. This possible dynamic is not recognised by Grant and Trotsky except in the most contradictory manner.

In his discussion of the inter-imperialist war and its effects on the UK in terms of increasing subordination to the USA, Grant comments about the increasing criticism of the conduct of the war by the working class: “In addition the working class in Britain is becoming more conscious and critical of the old school tie blimps in the colonial service and the armed forces, whose stupidity and incompetence of but a reflection of the fact that the British bourgeois system has completely outlived itself. A realisation of the enfeeblement and decline of the ruling class is beginning to crystallise itself in the consciousness of the masses. A mood of criticism on the basis of past defeats has penetrated all strata of society.”(p3) But the point is that this accurate recognition of the discontent of the workers with the ruling class does not mean that this situation will be translated into an immediate struggle for political power and the establishment of a workers government. Instead this development is an indication that the workers aspire to develop a more principled and anti-fascist form of struggle that is an expression of their interests and objectives. This point is not accepted by Grant wo instead indicates that growing discontent within British society is because of the limitations of what is a declining capitalism and he does not connect this point to the importance of the inter-imperialist war. He comments that: “In every sphere the ruling class has revealed its complete senility and incapacity to even conduct its own war. The corruption and incompetence industrially and militarily, raises sharply in the minds of the workers the question of the regime. In the factories, chaos, waste and mismanagement, the incapacity to organise production because of the fetters of the profit system, assume a particularly baleful character when counterposed to the ever-increasing exhortations for the workers to ‘go for it’. This is especially so when military defeats are justified by the ‘lack of equipment’.”(p4-5) Grant is assuming in an eclectic manner that the limitations of capitalism are undermining the ability to conduct the war in efficient terms but this is connected in a vague manner to the character of the economic system and so the importance of the necessity to establish the ability of the people to conduct a democratic form of opposition to fascism is ignored and evaded. Instead the only conclusion that seems to be apparent is the necessity to overthrow capitalism. But this perspective ignores the fact that the people aspire to be able to influence the character of the war in terms of the ability to establish democratic control of the army and government. Instead what is being suggested is that the economic contradictions of British capitalism have been intensified by the war and so the only perspective that is valid in this situation is to mobilise the workers to overthrow the system. But this very approach is rejected by the working class because it would imply that the interests of fascism could be advanced by the intensification of the contradictions of British capitalism to the point that its military struggle would be undermined. Instead it could be argued that the British working class is trying to uphold its interests in terms of the combination of defence of its strength in economic terms combined with the realisation of a greater effectiveness in terms of opposition to fascism. This means that it would be the principled task to develop forms of military tactics that could enhance the ability of the workers to establish leadership in the struggle against fascism. Such a development would be combined with the generation of the possibility to realise the formation of a worker’s government that would be able to conduct a more effective form of military opposition to fascism.

Instead of this perspective, Grant considers the ability of the trade union leaders to reject the struggle for power because of the very threat of fascism in a situation that is maturing for the ascent of the working class to domination of society: “The bourgeoisie has no reserve weapons at the present time. The ruined middle class, the dissatisfied workers, the lack of confidence of the rulers themselves: all lay the basis, not for a turn in the direction of fascism, but for the most revolutionary period in British history. The fragile basis for the rule of the bourgeoisie rests in the failure of the leadership of the workers to offer an alternative to capitalist rule, which they justify by the threat from ‘foreign fascism’.”(p6) But the point is that the workers themselves are primarily concerned by the possibility of invasion by German imperialism. It is not possible in these circumstances to develop a viable approach that tries to ignore these implications of the present military and political situation. This means that dissatisfaction with the British government should emphasise the importance of an alternative manner in which the people can conduct a more effective struggle against fascism. Only in this manner would it be possible to connect the grievances expressed by the usual aspects of the class struggle to the overall political situation of the uncertainties of the inter-imperialist war. In this manner the issue of progressive change that would result in the enhancement of the position of the working class in terms of increased power in economic terms would be connected to the realisation of the ability of the workers to be able to define the objectives of foreign policy, which would mean the increased influence of the working class in the conduct of opposition to the interests and objectives of the fascist imperialist powers. However, despite the limitations in his position, Grant seems to have been right to suggest that the left wing of the Labour party could act to uphold the interests of the workers in a limited manner. But he does not seem to connect this understanding to a coherent perspective that calls for the left wing of the Labour party to act to replace the coalition government with a more principled administration that could express the interests of the working class. In other words the very dogmatism of Grant means that he does not sufficiently recognise the possibilities for political change in the situation of the limitations of the coalition government to develop military opposition to the threat of fascist invasion. Hence, Grant fails to call for the overthrow of the coalition government and its replacement by a worker’s government that would involve the role of the left wing of the Labour party. Instead in a vague manner the perspective is outlined in a vague manner for the formation of a Labour government on a socialist programme, but this is not connected in an explicit manner with the necessity to develop and strengthen the process of struggle against imperialism and fascism. Instead this aim is outlined by Grant in a manner that seems to be abstracted from the challenges posed by the inter-imperialist war. Instead the emphasis in a narrow manner is on the importance of the Trotskyists developing positions of leadership of the struggle of the workers in the sphere of industry: “Our small forces must be trained and prepared to give leadership to the workers on all problems that face them in industry. Our opportunities in the factories are unlimited. With a correct policy and a true orientation we can grow at a tremendous pace, a pace that will enable us to face the gigantic tasks which confront us, with confidence.”(p16) You would be forgiven for forgetting that Grant is relating this perspective to the tasks of a period of inter-imperialist war. Instead his emphasis seems to be on economic tasks and the connected importance of the diplomatic situation seems to be obscured by this narrow approach.

However, in an important and eclectic manner, Grant in an inconsistent manner also comments that: “The mood of discontent simmering among the workers and middle class has no outlet yet. In fact, a great deal of it has been directed, for the present, even into patriotic channels.”(p18) And: “Aroused principally by the incompetence of the ruling class in ‘fighting fascism’ and backed up by the lessons of France where the ruling class acted as direct capitulators to Hitler, this discontent has found no channel which leads to a genuine fight against fascism. The Labour and the Communist parties accept the continued rule of the capitalists, and utter shrill warnings that any break in ‘national unity’ will mean victory for Hitler! The ILP offers only pacifism.”(p18) These comments are the most important indications that Grant has some awareness of the issues and strategy connected to the situation of inter-imperialist war. He implicitly accepts that the only principled perspective is to develop and realise a situation in which a genuine war against fascism can be conducted and realised. This objective does not mean accommodation to the domination of the coalition government, but instead the opposite stance of developing the forms of militant opposition and the ultimate overthrow of this administration so that the potential of a popular struggle against fascism can be conducted. This awareness contradicts the apparent ignoring of the previous indifference to the importance of the second world war that had been the basis of the economistic emphasis of the approach of Grant. Instead he is outlining the argument in favour of the objective of establishing a worker’s government in order to carry out the possibility of a genuinely effective form of military struggle against fascism. In this context he is criticising the coalition government for its failure to carry out effective opposition to fascism, and he indicates the limitations of the French bourgeois government of 1939 in this context. But Grant fails to make the apparent strategic conclusions that would seem to be connected to this analysis. He does not openly call for the formation of a worker’s government in order to conduct a principled and effective form of opposition to fascism and imperialism.

The point is that Grant in an inconsistent manner is accepting the necessity and possibility of a genuine process of struggle against fascism based on the expression of the popular will of the people. But this view is outlined in an inconsistent manner because of the issue that this approach could result in opportunism. This problem could be overcome if this standpoint is connected to the perspective of aiming to overthrow the present coalition government in order to promote the possibility of a genuine anti-fascist war. Such an approach is outlined in a confused and defensive manner when in a confused manner he outlines three different possibilities that may emerge in relation to the develop of the present situation. Firstly, he suggests that the British bourgeoisie may still be tempted to try and establish a process of accommodation with German imperialism. He comments: “If the ruling class under the threat of revolution, were to attempt to capitulate to Hitler as the French bourgeoisie did, they would immediately provoke an uprising among the masses. Such an attempt at capitulation would compel the Labour leaders to place themselves at the head of the masses in order to continue the war. Because of the feeling that would be aroused among the masses, and because their own heads would be at stake, they would be compelled to take control into their own hands. At least the left wing would do so. This would immediately promote the socialist revolution. But such a development is improbable in the extreme.”(p19) But this perspective is not unlikely because of the extent of the influence of the forces that favoured collaboration with the German government in the period of 1940-42. Instead the logical result of this understanding should have been the approach of calling for the formation of a Labour government in order to conduct a more effective and consistent form of military opposition to fascism and to also promote the process of the realisation of what would be advances towards socialism. But instead of this perspective Grant seems to accept that the only outcome of the war is that of the victory of the Allied forces under the leadership of the present bourgeois governments. Grant seems to accept that it is inevitable that the defeat of fascist imperialism will be as a result of the increasing effectiveness of the Allied forces. But he tries to deny in a contradictory manner the reactionary implications of this perspective by suggesting that the end of the war will result in revolutionary forms of discontent: “If on the other hand, complete victory over Germany and Japan was to be gained by Britain (in reality the USA) this too could not prevent revolutionary repercussions among the masses. The programme of finance capital is utopian and insane. The idea that the British masses would tolerate the forcible holding down of the continent of Europe and Asia, not to mention Africa, is absurd. Once the masses compare the glittering promises about ‘after the war’, of which they are sceptical even today, their indignation will rise to unprecedented heights when confronted with reality.”(p19) This analysis is a justification of a policy of passivity during the war because it is not possible to try and change the situation because of the ability of the Allies under the leadership of the USA to defeat the Fascist imperialist forces. Only the aftermath of the war will create the possibility for revolutionary developments because of the unrest within the working class of Europe. But this understanding seems to deny the fact that the victory of the Allies under the leadership of bourgeois democracy will result in the stabilisation of bourgeois democracy and Stalinism. Revolutionary possibilities will occur but it is more relevant not to wait for this situation and instead try to prepare for the development of the class struggle in terms of the immediate agitation for the formation of a left wing government in order to develop in an effective manner the prospect of a genuine anti-fascist war can be developed. But instead of this strategy Grant seems to rely on the possibility that the inter-imperialist war will result in the development of international class struggle: “The prospect of peace and compromise is even more remote. The antagonisms which have brought about the war and have been sharpened by it, have now reached an unbearable intensity. Compromise could only come about after the contestants were completely exhausted and the whole world was drained dry. This could only lead to further explosions. Long before the war had reached such a stage and it would require several years, the endurance of the masses would have reached breaking point and the stability of the imperialist regimes would be put to the test. Revolution would begin in Europe or Asia and alter the whole balance of forces.”(p19) It would seem that in general terms the third option seems to be considered by Grant the most likely. That the inter-imperialist war will result in the intensification of social contradictions that enables him to predict the possibility of revolutionary developments within Europe. This means that the option of the formation of a Labour government in order to develop a consistently anti-fascist war can be excluded as being a remote possibility.

Instead the actual perspective that seems to be considered as feasible is that the hardship of war will create discontent within the people and so generate the possibility for revolutionary developments. But such an approach ignores the importance of the second world war and the fact that people consider it necessary to defeat fascism. This is the issue that has to be tackled by the forces of the Fourth International if they are to relate to the motives and aspirations of the workers in the countries that are confronted by the threat of invasion by the Fascist imperialist forces. The point is that this is relevant because the defeat of France was caused by the collaboration of the French bourgeoise with the German fascists, and so the issue in that situation was the necessity to develop an effective and popular war of opposition that could have resisted the aims of German imperialism. The same issue is relevant in the UK and so the first option of Grant, which is the necessity to form a left-wing Labour government in order to wage a popular anti-fascist war is what is required under the given circumstances. But this is the very policy considered by Grant to be unrealistic. Instead he can only envisage the situation as that of an inter-imperialist war that will ultimately result in revolutionary developments. Hence, in these deterministic terms he is effectively not advocating the development of a popular anti-fascist war under the leadership of a form of left-wing government. Instead the situation is characterised by increasing discontent with the inter-imperialist war that will result in the creation of revolutionary governments. In other words, a repeat of the situation at the outcome of the first world war. But the point is that the situation is different because of the importance of the counterrevolutionary role of fascism. This means that an important issue is how to conduct an anti-fascist war in the most effective and popular manner. In this context the aim should be the formation of a genuine workers government in order to carry on a more effective and democratic war against fascism. But Grant seems to want to ignore the importance of the present character of the war in which the aspect of inter-imperialist conflict is combined with the importance of the struggle to uphold the principles of democracy against the threats posed by fascist reaction. In this manner the role of the class struggle has to develop primary anti-fascist objectives, such as the necessity to realise a worker’s government in order to challenge the expansionism of fascist imperialism in a more effective manner. Indeed, this objective would provide the various economic struggles of the working class with more political objectives and clarity. People would understand that their class interests as workers was connected to the task of the defeat of fascism and so provide momentum for the development of a struggle to replace the coalition government with a more left wing administration that would be able to carry out a popular form of opposition to imperialist fascism. But Grant seems to deny the importance of these possibilities because he is more concerned to define the character of the situation in terms of the usual dynamics of the class struggle. In other words he seems to want to ignore the importance of the present situation which demands a definite perspective in relation to the issue of how the working class should attempt to combine upholding its class interests and also developing the possibility of anti-fascist war that would create the political conditions for international socialist revolution.

Given the limitations of Grant’s document it is not surprising that it was criticised by the rival organisation, the Revolutionary Socialist League. Ted Grant did a reply in the article: “Reply of WIL to the RSL criticism of “Preparing for Power”(Marxist Internet Archive) It is interesting that an important aspect of the views of the RSL is that the WIL, and Grant in particular, have accommodated to the view of the possibility of an popular anti-fascist war. The fact that this is not their perspective means that it is quite simple for Grant to dismiss this criticism. In this reply Grant seems to suggest that the only conditions that would make anti-fascist war principled would be if there was an actual German invasion of the UK. It is interesting that in order to try and gloss over the importance of the criticisms of the RSL means that he does not outline any instances of the possibility to create a worker’s government that would carry out anti-fascist war. Instead this issue is evaded, and his emphasis is on the criticism of the RSL for upholding in a dogmatic manner the approach of revolutionary defeatism without connecting it to the political situation of the second world war. This would seem to imply that Grant is in favour of the formation of a workers government in order to carry on anti-fascist war, and Grant because of the pressures of the process of polemic seems to openly support this perspective in explicit terms: “The workers in Britain, as in America ‘do not want to be conquered by Hitler, and to those who say, ‘let us have a peace programme’, the workers will reply: ‘but Hitler does not want a peace programme’’. Therefore we say, we will defend the United States or Britain with a workers army, with workers officers, and with a workers government’.”(p16) But what does this mean in more precise terms? The point of criticism is that it would become the perspective of the revolutionary party to carry out agitation and propaganda in favour of the aim of the creation of the possibility of the formation of a workers government that would be able to realise the process of carrying out a more effective military struggle against fascism. In this context it would support the formation of democratic accountability within the armed forces in the context of the continuation of bourgeois democracy that would imply that it might be possible to establish the beginning of the process of genuine anti-fascist war before the formation of an actual workers government. But such a development would be connected to the generation of the influence of forms of workers control within society. In other words, a situation of dual power would be required if the possibility of the creation of the conditions for political development of anti-fascist war was to be generated. This process could only be consolidated by the realisation of the creation of an actual workers government. What is being suggested is that the advance of the influence and power of the working class within society would be the principled criteria that would imply the possibility of any form of critical support for what is still a bourgeois government as the basis to facilitate the realisation of a credible type of anti-fascist struggle. Grant ignores this issue because he is content to outline the formulations of Lenin and Trotsky without any qualification or modification in relation to the situation of the present, which may be considered to have changed since the development of policy on the issue of war by these important Marxists. It could be suggested that these revisions to the Marxist position on war are an expression of a tendency for social chauvinism and adaptation to the interests of the national bourgeoise of the bourgeois democratic countries. But this criticism could only be legitimate if it could be indicated that the actions of the working class implied nothing more than uncritical support for the aims of the national bourgeoisie in the second world war. Instead it has to be argued that it is possible for the influence of the working class in relation to the conduct of the war can be expressed in terms of its ability to impose its standpoint on the national bourgeois government. Indeed, this situation could be a prelude to the formation of the possibility of a genuine workers administration. In this context the power of the working class which is expressed in terms of its collective power could result in the increasing democratisation of society and the result is the enhanced ability to define the internal and foreign policy objectives of what is still a bourgeois democratic government. In this context of dual power, the character of the war would no longer be that of an inter-imperialist conflict and instead would become an expression of what has become a genuine expression of popular opposition to fascism. However, if this development does not occur, and instead the working class is still subordinated to the interests of the national bourgeoisie it would not be principled to promote the view that a genuine anti-fascist war was being promoted. In this situation it would still be relevant to replace the bourgeois government with a workers government in terms of the dynamics and possibilities of militant opposition. But this approach is not elaborated by Grant who is instead content to repeat Trotsky’s formula about the necessity of a worker’s government in order to oppose fascism.

The primary problem with the perspective of Grant is that it does not outline the possible manner in which the formation of a worker’s government could occur. The importance of the discontent of the working class is outlined but how this can be translated into the struggle for the realisation of a revolutionary administration is not elaborated. It could be argued that this failure to elaborate the political conditions for the formation of a worker’s government is not as important as the above expression of a perspective for the development of the political power of the working class which could be considered to have opportunist aspects. Grant may argue that the perspective outlined above is an expression of class collaboration because of the apparent accommodation of the working class to the interests of the working class in terms of the failure to realise a genuine revolutionary government. But this conclusion would be dogmatic because what is actually occurring is the capacity of the working class to impose its influence on society in terms of the development of the possibility to advance the aim of the realisation of the an anti-fascist war in which it has the ability to be able to define the character of events in a principled manner in terms of its class interests. In contrast it is actually the objective of the ruling class to limit the character of the military conflict to an inter-imperialist war that does not challenge the role and problem of fascism in Italy, Germany and Japan. In contrast it is in the interests of the working class to transform the inter-imperialist war into a genuine anti-fascist conflict in terms of the dynamic of the increased influence of its social power and related ability to establish the possibility to define the character and policy of the war. The political content of this process is not class collaboration but is instead the expression of the class struggle in a new form. The logical outcome of this progressive dynamic is the formation of a worker’s government. Hence the situation in which the working class still lacks political supremacy is a situation of dual power which expresses the potential for the completion of this development in terms of the formation of a worker’s government. It could be argued that the coalition government between the organisations of the ruling class and working class would undermine this potential for the realisation of a revolutionary process. But the refusal to form a coalition government would mean that the working class is on the defensive and has no influence on developments except in the form of the realisation of a strategy of proletarian revolution. But if support for this approach is not developed within the working class then the ruling class still has the ability to be able to dominate political events. However, if the working class aims for the formation of a progressive coalition government then this could become the prelude to the realisation of an effective revolutionary process in terms of the formation of what would be a genuine workers government, and this possibility would be the logical outcome of the creation of a progressive coalition administration. This possibility is not the expression of a new form of popular frontism because the objective of the representatives of the working class is not to defend bourgeois democracy but instead to aspire to the creation of a worker’s government. In other words, the situation of what is dual power is not an alternative to the realisation of proletarian revolution, and nor does it represent the stabilisation of the domination of the bourgeoise with the popular support of the working class. Instead what is occurring is the basis of a long-term process by which the working class is able to promote the possibility of assuming power in the form of a worker’s government. Why would the ruling class assent to this situation if it knew that the workers were aiming to realise political power? The answer is that they would not have any alternative because this development would represent the only manner in which the ruling class could obtain the popular support of the workers for the promotion of military opposition against the fascist imperialist powers. This means that it requires the development of the class consciousness of the working class if the process of radical change is to occur that would mean the generation of genuine and popular opposition to the forces of fascism. Grant does not recognise this possible dynamic of change because he can only conceive of a revolutionary defeatist form of opposition to the inter-imperialist war, and so he does not recognise sufficiently how the reactionary role of fascism can modify the traditional Leninist perspective of defeatism that is still being argued by Trotsky and Grant.

Grant indicates that the working class would most prefer to continue the war in terms of the formation of a Labour government. But he makes no conclusions from this observation except to suggest that this indicates the discrediting of the apparently pacifist illusions of the RSL. Hence, he does not recognise the agitational importance of the call for the workers to struggle to realise the formation of a Labour government in order to carry on the war in the most progressive manner in terms of genuine opposition to fascism. Indeed, in his polemic with the RSL, Grant argues that entry work in the labour party should not be a priority for the forces of Trotskyism. This stance is an indication that he does not consider the task of the creation of a Labour government during wartime to be a priority and instead advocates industrial work in a dogmatic manner and without any connection to the necessity to struggle for the formation of a Labour government committed to popular struggle against fascism. In other words, his approach is based on a rejection of the importance of the possibility to develop the possibility of the working-class acquiring power in terms of the aim of embarking on a genuine and popular struggle against fascism. The point is that the lessons provided by Trotsky that resulted from the experience of the Spanish civil war were not related to the situation of the second world war. Trotsky had outlined that the working class should be prepared to defend the bourgeois democratic republic from the threat of fascist counterrevolution in terms of the formation of democratic workers militia that would act in an independent manner and yet still oppose fascism in terms of the defence of the bourgeois democratic republic which would then become the basis to generate the development of the process of the struggle for socialism. But this approach was not applied to the second world war because of the insistence on the importance of the role of revolutionary defeatism. This approach was a mistake that failed to recognise that the situation was the same as that which was apparent in relation to the issues of the Spanish civil war. The point was the necessity to defend bourgeois democracy initially against the threat of fascist counterrevolution. But this defence would not be an expression of class collaboration and accommodation to bourgeois democracy because this very struggle would become the basis of the promotion of the role of international proletarian revolution. Trotsky did not appreciate that it was necessary to defend bourgeois democracy in international terms if the potential to defeat fascism was to be advanced. In terms of the success of this perspective the aim of the realisation of proletarian revolution would be advanced and not undermined.

The various issues of the second world war are outlined in an article by J.P. Joubert, entitled ‘Revolutionary defeatism’ (Marxist Internet Archive). He outlined how Lenin upheld the position of revolutionary defeatism between 1914-17, but after the February revolution in Russia he was in favour of Soviet power and a democratic peace without annexations. Hence there was nothing dogmatic or absolute about revolutionary defeatism and instead it would be adapted to the prevailing political conditions in terms of the issue of what was the most effective policy to develop the internationalist class consciousness of the workers. For example the author of this article outlines how Trotsky was prepared to propose the defence of bourgeois democratic and republican Spain against the threat of fascist counterrevolution. Joubert quotes Trotsky as saying: “The workers defend bourgeois democracy, however, not by the methods of bourgeois democracy (e.g., Popular Fronts, electoral blocs or governmental coalitions, etc) but by their own methods of revolutionary class struggle. Thus, by participating in the military struggle against fascism, they continue at the same time to defend their own organisations, their rights and their interests against the bourgeois democratic government.”(p13) Trotsky indicated that the defence of bourgeois democracy is part of and does not contradict the overall perspective of the overthrow of bourgeois democracy and the realisation of a workers government. The question that obviously arises is why this standpoint cannot be applied to the situation posed for the working class by the advent of the second world war. This was the very question that was ultimately evaded by Trotsky.

In other words, it is accepted by Trotsky in relation to the Spanish civil war that it is necessary that the working class defend the role of bourgeois democracy in relation to the threat of fascist counterrevolution. But that this defence is carried out in terms of the importance of the activity of the workers organisations who organise militias and elect the officers of the army. In this manner the working class should be able to simultaneously defend the continuation of the bourgeois democratic republic against the threat of fascist counterrevolution whilst also upholding and promoting its own interests in terms of the promotion of the aim of proletarian revolution. The very importance of the role of the working class in relation to the defence of the bourgeois democratic republic should also be an expression of the capacity of the people to be able to extend their influence within society and so establish a situation of dual power which expresses the favourable possibilities for the workers to aspire to political power. But this perspective is not elaborated in terms of the second world war even though the issues are of a similar character. Instead it is argued that there is no difference between the fascist and bourgeois democratic regimes because of their similar capitalist and imperialist character. But there is an important difference because in the bourgeois democratic societies the working class has the ability to organise to defend its interests, but such freedom of expression is denied in the fascist societies. Therefore, the workers have a political interest in the defence of bourgeois democracy against the possibility of the victory of fascism in the second world war. But this recognition of the gains of bourgeois democracy need not result in class collaboration because the workers should aim to defend their interests in terms of the principles of political independence and aspire to increase their influence within society and so ultimately form a worker’s government. In this context the workers should form strong organisations of a political and trade union character that initially aim to influence the bourgeois democratic government to carry out the most progressive form of war against fascism. This should relate to the election of the officers in the army by the rank and file soldiers and the aspiration to create a left wing government that would be accountable to the opinions of the workers.

But instead of this position Trotsky differentiates between the situation in relation to inter-imperialist conflict and a civil war between bourgeois democracy and fascism: “In a war between two bourgeois states, the purpose is one of imperialist conquest and not a struggle between democracy and fascism. In the Spanish civil war the question is: democracy or fascism.”(Joubart p14) But it could be argued that the issue of democracy versus fascism is also important in relation to the situation of inter-imperialist conflict. Hence it is not an expression of class collaboration or opportunism for the working class of the bourgeois democratic countries to provide forms of critical support for the war effort against fascism. Indeed, the aim would be to promote the importance of effective and resolute action to defeat the forces of fascism. This situation would not mean class compromise or the undermining of the interests of the working class because it would instead be in the interests of the workers to facilitate the military defeat of the fascist countries. The point is that the workers have the ability to organise in the bourgeois democratic countries, but they have no political rights in the fascist nations. Hence it would be in the interests of the international working class to facilitate the ability to conduct a popular war against fascism based on the transformation of the armies of the bourgeois democratic countries into becoming the expression of popular militias. The workers would aspire to achieve democratic control of the army and in that manner develop control over the strategy of developing opposition to fascism. They would oppose any expression of collaboration with fascism within the bourgeois democratic governments and instead the influence of the workers would enable the most effective form of opposition to the military aims of the fascist powers to be developed. This aspect of compromise of the workers with the bourgeois democratic governments would not undermine the ability to promote their independent class interests and instead would be connected to the aim of the realisation of the possibility of a worker’s government. If this approach had been carried out in France it may have been possible to carry out an effective war against fascism instead of the situation of compromise between the fascists and the French bourgeoisie. In contrast the perspective of Trotsky of support for the principles of revolutionary defeatism does not seem to recognise that the situation was being characterised by the increasing support of many sections of the capitalist class in in international terms for fascism and this meant that the working class had an interest in the maintenance of bourgeois democracy. In this context the aspect of inter-imperialist conflict was becoming secondary because of the very success of the fascist forces in developing an international united front of counterrevolutionary forces against the possibility of proletarian revolution, as occurred in France. This point was inadequately recognised by Trotsky, but it did not result in the revision of the approach of revolutionary defeatism.

However, it could be argued that the Proletarian Military Policy was a major revision of the standpoint of revolutionary defeatism. This emphasised the necessity of the democratisation of the armed forces of the major imperialist powers so that in that manner the possibility to establish the ability of the working class to influence the objectives of the various imperialist armies could be realised. But the point is that this aim seems to be abstract if is not connected to the elaboration of the attitude of the working class in relation to the war being carried out by the various bourgeois democratic governments in relation to the role of the fascist powers. Surely the proletarian military policy should have as its objective the democratisation of the armed forces in order to facilitate the possibility of the conducting of a progressive war against the forces of fascism. But this aspect of perspectives does not seem to have been elaborated. Instead the political emphasis was on the importance of revolutionary defeatism which seemed to have little relevance to the situation in Europe in 1939-40. Instead of the development of a perspective that could relate to the issues of the war in a realistic and principled manner the Fourth International was unable to relate to the actual political character of the second world war and develop an effective anti-fascist strategy. The problem was that the approach of revolutionary defeatism combined with the proletarian military policy was unable to relate to the complexities of the situation and primarily the necessity to develop international proletarian opposition to fascism. Instead this opposition was conducted by the role of the UK, USA and Soviet Union after 1941. In this context the international working class was absorbed into the war efforts of the bourgeois democratic powers who conducted the war against fascism in a reactionary manner. The activity of the Fourth International was to effectively try to ignore the importance of the second world war and to instead emphasise the importance of economic issues. Reluctantly it was accepted that the aim in the countries occupied by the fascist powers was that of national liberation, but this was not connected to the necessity to transform the inter-imperialist war into a struggle for popular democracy and against fascism. Effectively the political limitations of the Fourth International meant that it had nothing to say about the tasks of the working class in the major bourgeois democratic powers. These limitations were the logical outcome of the attempt to apply the perspective of revolutionary defeatism in a situation in which it was no longer applicable.

The major defence of the position of the Fourth International was carried out by Ernest Mandel in his book: ‘The Meaning of the Second World War’ (Verso, London 1986) He connects the character of the war to the role of competition at the level of the world economy that had not been resolved by the outcome of the second world war. This meant that there was a continual dynamic of the necessity to establish a consistent and effective hegemony over the world economy by one power, or by a combination of nations. He comments: “So the second act of the imperialist drama unfolded according to the inner logic of the world capitalist system. Once again the stake was the international hegemony of one imperialist power, to be won and maintained by an active combination of military conquest or pressure and economic domination or plunder – the exact mix depending on the relative strength or weakness of the individual contestants, deriving from such inner constraints as the level of economic development and the character of political institutions. On the eve of the second world war these powers were the USA, Germany, Japan and Britain, with France and Italy playing the role of secondary allies, lacking the strength to be real contenders.”(p14) This comment may be an adequate description of the economic character of what was inter-imperialist rivalry, but it does not mention the political aspects of the situation which was defined by the opposition between bourgeois democracy and fascism. This very aspect meant that the working class could not simply adopt the most principled position on the war in terms of the approach of revolutionary defeatism, which had been advocated by Lenin in 1914. Indeed, it could be argued that revolutionary defeatism of this type was problematical because it expressed no attitude in relation to the task of opposing fascism as a central task of the second world war. The point is that the character of the war was not a repetition in a similar form to that which had occurred in 1914. In 1914 it could be argued that the issues were defined by the importance of economic rivalry that had resulted in military conflict, and so in these terms it was not principled or internationalist to support any of the forces in this war. But in 1939 the situation was modified by the ambition of Hitler to establish the supremacy of fascism within Europe, and so it could be defined as both principled and progressive to develop a perspective of the defence of bourgeois democracy by the methods of the class struggle. In other words, the situation in 1939 was not a repetition of that which had occurred between 1914-18. Mandel disputes this viewpoint because of his emphasis on the role of inter-imperialist contradictions and the related importance of the struggle for economic hegemony in international terms. This point is not irrelevant, but it was connected to the political and ideological aspect of the aspiration of the fascist powers to undermine the strength of the international working class by the creation of empires that were based on authoritarianism and ruthless dictatorship. In this context the importance of the defence of the interests of the international working class against the combination of the interests of fascism and capitalism became an important issue. This meant that critical defence of bourgeois democracy was the basis to begin the process of opposing the counterrevolutionary threat of fascism and so generating the possibility of the progress of international proletarian revolution. The point being made is that the connection of imperialism to fascism meant that the attitudes of Marxism towards the war should have been modified. This would not mean the justification of the imperialist character of the Allied powers, but instead the attempt of the working class of the bourgeois democratic powers to modify the objectives of these countries in the war to the extent that democratic objectives be adopted such as the primary emphasis on defeating fascism.

However, Mandel consistently rejects the above standpoint. He comments: “The assertion that the real stake of WWII was the establishment of the world hegemony of one imperialist power, and that the war was the culmination of a process of counterrevolution, should not, of course, be taken to refer solely to the particularly abhorrent role played by Hitler and German Nazism in bringing about a new world war. On the contrary, it represents a general judgement upon imperialism, as a specific form of capitalism generated by the fundamental contradictions between the internationalisation and socialization of the productive process on the one hand, and its continued organization by private and national interests, on the other.”(p19-20) This point may be valid but it is one-sided because it is based on a rejection of the political and ideological factors that resulted in the development of the second world war. Indeed, Mandel contradicts this view when he also contends that the failure of the forces of international socialism to defeat fascism was an important negative contribution to the development of the second world war. But the rigid emphasis on the dynamics of world and national capitalism for the outbreak of the international conflict means that he can theoretically justify the ignoring of the political aspects of this situation. The result of his economic determinism is to emphasise the contradictions of imperialism and capitalism in terms that deny the importance of the role of fascism in the process of the generation of military conflict. What is apparent s that this approach can only establish a determinist political approach that s reduced to the importance of inter-imperialist contradictions. This means that the significance of the aspect of political questions becomes ignored, and so the tensions between bourgeois democracy and fascism are glossed over. However, there is a contradiction in Mandel’s approach because he also admits that the role of Hitler is crucial for explaining the development of the second world war. Mandel outlines how the intentions of Hitler is based on a reactionary expansionism that is connected to the intention to embark on the Second World War. But this aspect cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of the economic interests of German imperialism it also has to be connected to the aspiration to achieve the domination of fascism over the political system of bourgeois democracy. The result of this aspect means that the international working class have a class interest in trying to develop united action in order to defend the interests of democracy as opposed to the expansionist requirements of German fascism. This situation means that the tactics required should not be a repetition of those advocated by Lenin in relation to the first world war. Instead the workers have to develop an internationalist anti-fascist perspective that connects the aim of international revolution with the defeat of fascism. Mandel outlines how the dynamics of the inauguration of the second world war were based on the aggressive intentions of German fascism and imperialism, but he does not conclude that this aspect may have modified the character of the war as being different to that of the first world war. Hence he does not consider the possibility that the very aggressiveness and expansionism of German fascism might imply that the character of the war of the bourgeois democracies had defensive and progressive aspects such as the aim of opposing the expansion of fascism. Hence the role of the working class should have been to provide critical and independent support for the defence of democracy against the reactionary intentions of fascism. This perspective would not have been the justification of class collaboration because such a policy would have been connected to the aim to realise the formation of workers governments in the democratic imperialist powers. In other words if we accept that the second world war was caused by the reactionary ambitions of German fascism and imperialism, then this should have logically meant that Mandel should have accepted the necessity of different tactics compared to those adopted at the time of the first world war. But instead of this acceptance of such a modification, he implies that the approach of revolutionary defeatism adopted in 1914 should not be modified. Yet he accepts the situation was different by referring to the situation in France in which the ruling class accepted the aims of Hitler rather than promote the possibility of proletarian revolution as the basis of anti-fascist resistance. In other words, in empirical terms he outlines the actual necessity of working class leadership in the struggle to defend democracy against the actuality of the situation of collaboration between the ruling class of France and the forces of the German military invasion. The point is that the situation in France indicated the necessity of an anti-fascist revolution as the basis of the defence of democracy and the interests of the working class, and this perspective would have actually have meant the rejection of a situation of accommodation by the workers to the interests of the French bourgeoisie. In this context the role of the British troops in France would have acquired a genuinely progressive content because it would have been based on support for the interests of democracy and opposition to the aggressive intentions of German imperialism.

Mandel defines the character of the role of the Churchill led government in the UK as the defence of the British empire and its imperialist interests against the adversary of German imperialism. This point is true, but it ignores the fact that the influence of the working class could change the character of the war. It could be possible under the conditions of the situation of the threat of invasion by the German army that it would be possible to develop the influence of the working class to the extent that the character of the war become a genuinely anti-fascist struggle for the defence of democracy. It could be argued that this was the justification of class collaboration but this would be a dogmatic view because the aim of the military policy of British imperialism would be related to the aim of the liberation of Europe from the domination of fascism. Indeed, this was the only manner in which it was possible to obtain popular support for the military aims of British imperialism. In this context the approach of revolutionary defeatism would lack credibility because it could only be considered to be an expression of accommodation to the interests of German fascism. Instead it was necessary to outline a perspective that would be based on the aim of the development of the influence of the working class within society so that the aims of the military policy of the government would be increasingly connected to the aspiration to oppose the domination of Europe by fascism. But instead of this perspective because of the lack of the influence of the role of the working class within society the military aims of the government were based on confrontation with Japan and military operations against the German army in Africa. If the influence of the working class had been greater it could have developed mass support for a war of liberation in Europe, but if this aim was to become feasible it would be necessary to strive for the realisation of a worker’s government. Hence the intention to carry our genuine anti-fascist war would have actually meant the intensification of the class struggle in order to undermine and oppose the coalition government and to instead establish a government that was based on the interests of the working class. This process would not have been that of revolutionary defeatism which would have aimed to end the war, but instead to establish a worker’s government that would have aspired to carry out a genuine anti-fascist war. But until it became possible to complete the realisation of the revolutionary process it would not have been opportunist for the workers to apply pressure on the coalition government to become more serious in the attempt to establish serious measures to try and genuinely begin an actual war for the liberation of Europe from the domination of fascism. This perspective would not be that of class collaboration because it would be based on the working class developing an independent policy to differentiate itself from the cautious limitations of the coalition government. To achieve these ambitious aims the workers would strive to democratise the army and to develop the possibility of workers control of industry. In other words, the anti-fascist objectives of the workers would actually be the motivation to intensify the process of the class struggle, and so would provide clarity to the actions of the workers. In contrast the approach of revolutionary defeatism was not appropriate for the situation in the UK in the period 1939-40. Instead the ruling class supported an accommodation to Hitler and the workers had become demoralised by the victories of fascism. What would have increased the morale of the workers would have been the credibility of an effective anti-fascist strategy that would have led to the enhancement of class consciousness and led to actions to increase the social power of the working class. Thus, the character of an anti-fascist approach was connected to the intensification of the class struggle. It would have been relevant to raise the call to replace the coalition government with a worker’s government in order to continue the struggle against fascism. But people like Grant failed to make this call because of the limitations of the approach of revolutionary defeatism. This meant that their perspectives were abstract and failed to meet the challenges of the situation. This limitation seems to have been repeated by Mandel who is aware of the reactionary character of German fascism and yet is unable to connect this to a credible policy in the countries of bourgeois democracy. Instead he adheres to the approach of revolutionary defeatism as a dogma that is not based on the immediate requirements of the situation in both France and the UK. In France it would have been necessary to call for immediate proletarian revolution in 1939 in order to defeat the problem of fascist invasion, and in the UK to call for the development of a popular war against fascism. But even with the benefit of hindsight Mandel is reluctant to uphold this type of perspective. Instead he is content to repeat the various ambiguous views of Trotsky about the second world war. But it is necessary to carry out an evaluation of the approach of Trotsky in order as a result to develop a more plausible and principled basis to uphold the aims of opposing fascism. Unfortunately, Mandel is reluctant to carry out this task. But we can carry out this process of revision and improvement of the standpoint of Trotsky.

The point being made is that the very reactionary character of German imperialism as fascism meant that the political situation was not identical to that of the first world war. There was an aspect of the progressive character of the role of the bourgeois democratic countries because they were opposed to the expansionist aims of fascism. It could have been possible for the working class to influence the character of the role of bourgeois democracy in terms of increasing its influence within society and as a result having an importance in relation to the aims of non-fascist capitalist countries. But Mandel instead defines the character of the world war in the following terms. Firstly, an inter-imperialist war that was based on the aim of the establishment of world hegemony, and the USA was the victor in this conflict. Secondly a just war of the Soviet Union fought in order to defend its social gains and to oppose the domination of German fascism. Thirdly, a just war of the Asian peoples which was based on the principles of national independence and this included the struggle of the Chinese people against Japanese imperialism. Fourthly, a just war of the people of Europe against the domination of fascism, and this type of struggle would acquire the aspects of the dynamic of the combination of national liberation and socialist revolution. He concludes that: “By ‘just wars’ are meant wars that should have been fought. and which revolutionaries supported then as they do now. This categorization avoids the political ambiguity of the formula according to which the forces active in the war are divided into ‘fascist’ and ‘anti-fascist’, the division based on the notion that – that because of their specific nature – the German, Italian and Japanese forms of imperialism should have been fought in alliance with the ruling classes of Britain, the United States, France, etc. The politics of ‘anti-fascist alliance’, whatever the semantic meaning of the words involved, amounts in reality to systematic class collaboration: the political parties, and especially the Communist parties which maintained that the Western Imperialist states were waging a war against Nazism, ended by forming coalition governments in 1945 wherein they actively participated in the reconstruction of the bourgeois state and the capitalist economy. In addition, the incorrect understanding of the character of Western states’ intervention in the war led to a systematic betrayal of the colonial populations’ anti-imperialist struggles, not to speak of the counterrevolution in Greece.”(p45-46)

This understanding is generally correct, but it is limited in terms of the dogmatic denial of the possibility of the democratic imperialist powers conducting a progressive struggle against fascism. The point is that whilst it could be argued that it is an aspect of the character of bourgeois democratic imperialism to conduct a reactionary struggle with the fascist imperialist powers, this aspect can be transformed by the level of effectiveness of the intervention of the working class in the process of political activity. It is necessary that the workers call for the democratic transformation of the army and strive to establish a situation in which the imperialist aims of the bourgeois democratic powers becomes replaced by the perspective of the necessity to conduct a genuine and popular anti-fascist conflict. The point being made is that the increased level of strength and consciousness of the working class can result in the creation of a situation in which the effective development of dual power means that the workers can influence the policy of the bourgeois democratic government in relation to the war. The discontent of the working class in France and Britain in 1939-40 could have resulted in the realisation of the possibility to enhance the ability of the people to be able to transform what was an inter-imperialist war into a genuine struggle against fascism. This development would have been part of the process of the attempt to establish a worker’s government that could have carried on war against fascism in the most consistent and principled manner. But the initial point is that the enhanced influence of the working class within society would have meant that the government would have been forced to carry out a genuine form of people’s war with fascism. The situation would have been similar to that in Spain in 1936 when Trotsky called for the defence of bourgeois democracy against the possibility of fascist counterrevolution. But Mandel ignores these dynamics and instead refers to eclectic examples of the reactionary role of Western imperialism in order to justify the view that the situation was a reactionary inter-imperialist conflict that could not have expressed popular and principled anti-fascist struggle. But the reactionary role of Western imperialism was because the working class was not able to intervene in order to transform the situation from that of an inter-imperialist conflict into that of popular struggle against fascism. In other words the situation was potentially defined by the possibility of the realisation of the activity of the working class, which would have created the development of an authentic anti-fascist struggle but instead because of the inability of the workers to challenge the domination of the national bourgeoisie and the role of the coalition government in the UK the result was a failure to transform the situation into that of credible anti-fascist struggle. But even under these circumstances it would have been in the interest of the workers of the UK to oppose any invasion by the forces of German fascism. In other words, the overall position of the British workers should have been to aspire to increase their influence within society in order to create the economic and political conditions to conduct a genuine anti-fascist war. This would initially have meant the creation of a situation of dual power based on the effective mass influence of the role of workers councils and their ability to force the coalition government to carry out progressive measures and to conduct the most resolute form of anti-fascist struggle. The logical culmination of this process would have been the establishment of a worker’s government in order to consistently oppose the reactionary aims of fascist imperialism. But Mandel does not seem to recognise this dynamic because he can only envisage the situation in terms of conflict between rival imperialist powers. But the logic of this should have been the promotion of the overthrow of the governments of the Allied powers regardless of the political and military situation. In contrast the perspective of revolutionary Marxism should have been the advocacy of the overthrow of the coalition government of the UK only when the working class was able to envisage the possibility of conducting a more effective struggle against fascism. Until that situation was realised it would be more appropriate to uphold the position of critical support for the coalition government to the extent that it was prepared to promote the potential to develop popular opposition to fascism. Such a situation would not imply the undermining of the class interests of the working class because what is envisaged is the transformation of the political situation in terms of the generation of the increased social influence of the role of the people within society. The very capacity of the working class to create popular organs to express their aspirations would become the basis to generate the dynamics of anti-fascist struggle. This means that the logic of this development is progress towards the development of dual power and the possibility of the formation of a worker’s government. But Mandel does not recognise these possibilities because he can only in a rigid and dogmatic manner conceive of the major aspect of the character of the second world war as a conflict between rival and antagonistic imperialist powers. This static approach means that he cannot contemplate the ability and dynamism of the working class to politically intervene in an effective manner and so transform the character of the situation. Therefore, he ultimately conceives of a passive and contemplative working class in the UK and USA which is unable to be able to act in order to change the situation in a progressive manner. The result of rigid standpoint is that he effectively defines the working class of the Allied powers as being inherently passive and so unable to dynamically act in order to alter the balance of class forces in a progressive manner.

This criticism of Mandel does not mean that he is wrong to define the initial character of the Second World War as primarily being that of an inter-imperialist conflict. But the point is that there is also the aspect of the opposition between bourgeois democracy and fascism. This means that the working class has the possibility to transform what has been an inter-imperialist conflict into something that is more progressive, but this means that the balance of power within society has to be altered. This possibility would require that the working class form its own organisations in order to try and realise a situation of dual power within society. But Mandel does not seem to recognise this potential of the class struggle. He cannot consider the potential for the political situation to change which would mean that a progressive anti-fascist struggle becomes credible within the Allied countries. Thus, Mandel comments: “The American and British ruling classes fought the war not in order to defeat fascism, but to break the resistance of the German and Japanese bourgeoisies to the maintenance or extension of their own particular interests. Those sections of the labour movement in Europe and Asia who entered the war supporting their national bourgeoisies in this enterprise, and without elaborating their own independent class goals, necessarily also ended up by supporting the denial or restriction of democratic and national liberties for millions of workers and peasants in large parts of Europe and Asia, whenever these latter arose to assert interests that ran counter to those of the Western bourgeoisie. In other words, this lack of clarity regarding the social character of the war waged by the capitalist states was to lead – as confirmed by practical experience, especially after 1943 – directly to class collaboration and the strangling of revolutionary possibilities which emerged during the second world wars, with the important difference that the ability of the European working class to formulate independent war aims was considerably greater in 1917-18 than in 1943-54”(p64-65) But this outcome was not because of class collaboration being the primary cause and instead was because of popular support for opposition to fascism. This meant the progressive alternative was not some unworkable form of revolutionary defeatism but instead the creation of a genuinely popular type of anti-fascist struggle. The creation of the political independence of the working class would be advanced by the success of a perspective that was about achieving the increased influence of the people over the conduct of the war. This meant the transformation of what was primarily an inter-imperialist conflict into a popular struggle against fascism. Such a development would not have meant regression into the justification of opportunism but instead the opposite situation would have been apparent in that it would have required the enhancement of the political independence of the working class in order to promote an effective anti-fascist perspective. In contrast, Mandel seems to have nothing to suggest in terms of the role of strategy for the working class within the bourgeois democratic countries. He does not outline what revolutionary defeatism would mean in terms of the practical situation posed by the second world war. Instead revolutionary defeatism is suggested as being the principled alternative to a situation of class compromise and opportunism but what this means in practice is not outlined. In contrast we would suggest that the influence of the working class within society would have been enhanced by the promotion of an effective anti-fascist standpoint that would be based on the adherence to the conception of a people’s war against fascism. This would not mean an acceptance of the aims of imperialism but instead would be its very opposite. What would be apparent is the development of the methods of class struggle in order to enhance the ability of the working class to advocate measures that express the interests and aims of opposing the influence of fascism. This would be the form that the class struggle would have and is the basis to extend the influence of the workers within society. In contrast, Mandel has no perspective. He knows what he is against but is not able to outline a coherent approach that would provide indications of who the working class should extend and enhance its influence within society. Instead the perspective of revolutionary defeatism is reduced to a formula which seems to be of no practical significance. Indeed, it becomes the justification of pacifism, or even an accommodation to passivity within the working class. These limitations have to be opposed by the promotion of a more dynamic approach that is able to articulate a perspective of the potential for effective mass struggle to transform the inter-imperialist war into a genuine opposition to fascism. This possibility is also created by the fact that defence of bourgeois democracy is an integral aspect of this situation, but this aspect is completely ignored by Mandel who instead in a dogmatic manner reduces the character of the second world war to a repeat of the war of 1914-18. The importance of this limitation is that it justifies the lack of strategy in the approach of Mandel. He fails to address the important issue of what should be the attitude of the working class in the bourgeois democratic countries in relation to the war of 1939-45.

Instead of addressing this issue, Mandel considers that anti-fascism in the bourgeois democratic countries had a false and illusory character: “For British imperialism and its allies in the minor European imperialist countries, the main ideological weapon was anti-fascism. By playing upon the British and European masses justified hatred of Hitler and other fascist regimes suppression of the labour movement – encroachment upon vital worker’s rights and freedoms and crimes against humanity – such propaganda by and large succeeded in subordinating basic class antagonisms between capital and wage labour to the priority of defeating the Nazis. The imperialist character of the British, French and American states, their continuing exploitation and oppression of hundreds of millions of human beings in the colonial empires, the wholesale denial of elementary human rights therein, was successfully effaced by the propaganda -r or at least pushed into the background. The complicity of social democracy, the trade union bureaucracy and the international communist apparatus was vital to the effectiveness of the campaign.”(p86) But the imperialist character of the UK and the USA did not in and of itself invalidate the possibility of principled and popular struggle against fascism. The point was that the imperialist character of the UK would be most effectively undermined by the development of mass action by the working class that enabled a genuinely popular struggle against fascism to occur. Such a development would raise the issue that an authentic anti-fascist country should not dominate other countries by means of an imperialist empire. Instead the democratic impetus of the anti-fascist struggle would create the dynamic and possibilities for the facilitating of the liberation of the colonial countries. In contrast strict adherence to the approach of revolutionary defeatism would mean that the political situation was charactr4ised by passivity and nothing would change in the countries of the bourgeois democratic powers. Only the onset of genuine and participatory struggle against fascism by the working class would create the feasible possibility to connect the aims of the struggle with the aim of the liberation of the colonies. This is because the increased influence of the working class caused by the popular character of opposition to fascism would change the political situation in a progressive manner and so undermine the continuation of the imperialist character of bourgeois democracy. In other words, the anti-fascism of the working class was not a form of class collaboration and instead was an expression of the attempt to increase the influence of the people within society. This development would mean that the priorities of the ruling class would be challenged and in that manner the issue of the role of the continuation of imperialism would be called into question. But the passive doctrine of revolutionary defeatism would mean that the working class would remain subordinate within society and the adverse balances of forces would not be undermined by popular action. In that context the domination of bourgeois democracy as a type of imperialism would remain unchanged. Only the generation of the anti-fascist mobilisation of the working class would create a new and more favourable balance of class forces that could result in challenging the power of both capitalism and imperialism. But this dynamic is not recognised by Mandel because of his adherence to orthodox revolutionary defeatism.

The point being made is that the approach of revolutionary defeatism is not connected to the promotion of a viable strategy for the transformation of society. Instead in a moralistic manner the limitations of imperialism are outlined by the revolutionary forces, but this standpoint has no constructive influence on the opinions of the working class. Instead the only approach that could contribute to the transformation of the political situation would be to propose popular measures that would facilitate the development of a people’s war against fascism. Mandel was unaware of these possibilities because implicitly he had no confidence in the perspective of the formation of a workers government in order to carry on the struggle against fascism in the most effective manner. Instead his adherence to the approach of revolutionary defeatism meant that his strategy was problematical and as a result he was unable to outline what the working class should have proposed in the situation of 1939-40. Mandel is aware that the workers in the UK during the period 1939-45 were often discontented, but he has no feasible perspective to offer to translate this discontent into the struggle for the formation of a worker’s government. The point being made is that the limitations of Mandel means that he is not aware of the progressive possibilities for the advance of the European revolution that could have been created by the formation of a workers government in the UK that was committed to a popular war against fascism. This type of development would have meant that an appeal for support of the German workers could have been made and they would have been encouraged to strive to overthrow the reactionary fascist regime. In other words, the perspective of a worker’s government in the UK would have been to encourage the possibility of international class struggle within Europe, and in this manner the prospect of the advance of the revolutionary process would have been tremendously advanced. Instead Mandel is content to outline how the end of the war led to revolutionary type developments within Europe, which is true, but the situation would have been more politically favourable to the success of the process of international proletarian revolution if a workers government had been formed within the UK during the period of the war. Such a development would have meant that the issue became that of the struggle for genuine socialism against the alternative of fascist counterrevolution. The character of socialism would have been defined not by the bureaucratic state of the USSR and instead by the authentic administration of a worker’s state in the UK. Furthermore, this advance of the process of proletarian revolution would have meant the transformation of the world situation and the issue of the progress of world revolution would have become relevant. But Mandel because of his dogmatism is unable to recognise the potential possibilities of this type of anti-fascist perspective. Instead his dogmatic reduction of the second world war to still being a repetition of the first world war means that he is unable to connect the ideology of anti-fascism to the possibilities of the progress of proletarian revolution. His caution about not making the error of national chauvinism means that he is unable to elaborate a strategy of revolutionary change in France and the UK. Instead of recognising the revolutionary possibilities of anti-fascism he can only caution against making concessions to support for bourgeois democracy. The result of this dogmatism means that he is unable to provide advice about what should have been the approach of the working class in the bourgeois democratic imperialist countries between 1939-45. Instead the potential of revolutionary struggle is limited to the resistance of the workers in the countries occupied by the fascist powers, and in this context, he particularly praises the actions of the resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece. But this one-sidedness means that the possibilities for the formation of a worker’s government in the UK are not mentioned and discussed. Instead his rigid adherence to Trotsky’s perspective of revolutionary defeatism means that the strategic question of the role of the working class in the UK and USA is not outlined in any satisfactory detail. This means that his approach is limited by the influence of dogmatism. The caution about the possibility of advocating a policy that could be interpreted as justifying class collaboration means that Mandel instead is unable to provide any strategic advice for the workers of the bourgeois democratic countries. But this omission is serious because it is these countries that were central to the possibility of the advance of the world revolution in the period 1939-45. Primarily the issue of the formation of a worker’s government in the UK was central to the possibility of transforming what had been an inter-imperialist war into a genuine popular struggle against fascism. This development was not unrealistic because the working class in the UK already had an anti-fascist consciousness but this was not connected to the strategic importance of the formation of a workers government. Mandel is unable to provide important lessons on this issue because he implicitly considers that the realisation of a worker’s government in the UK was not a feasible possibility. Instead he provides no arguments that could have represented the ability to transform the inter-imperialist war into a popular war against fascism. Instead his emphasis on the genuine role of the anti-fascist struggle is limited to those countries that have been occupied by the fascist powers. He has no strategic perspective for the working class of the bourgeois democratic countries.

Donny Gluckstein outlines in his: ‘A Peoples History of the Second World War’ (Pluto Press, London 2012) the more feasible view that the working class should attempt to overcome the domination of imperialism in the allied countries in order to conduct a people’s war against fascism. He outlines the capitulation of the French ruling class to the prospect of a German occupation, and so the resistance that developed was an expression of a people’s war against fascism. In relation to the UK he outlines the importance of two different aspects, the determination of the British government under Churchill to carry out an imperialist war and the attitude of the people who were determined to oppose the aims of fascism. But he does not outline how the aspect of the people’s war in the UK could have become dominant in the context of the continuation of an imperialist war waged by the ruling class of the British government. Instead he indicates aspects of discontent that indicated the possibility to realise the creation of a worker’s government in order to continue the war against fascism in a more popular manner. But what was required was to transform this situation of criticism of the coalition government in the UK into a genuine struggle for the realisation of a worker’s government. In that manner it would become possible to carry out genuine struggle against fascism. In other word’s the problem of revolutionary Marxism was that it lacked a strategy to realise the aim of a worker’s government in the period of the second world war. The result was that the people considered that they had no other option than to support the government in the attempt to defeat the fascist powers. What should have been an important perspective of the Marxists would have been to call for the replacement of the coalition government with the formation of a Labour government. In this manner the process of the development of a worker’s government would have been advanced. Instead of this type of political perspective the Trotskyists concentrated on economic issues to the exclusion of the importance of the political aspects of the situation. They were unable to relate the situation of Spain in 1936 to the second world war, and so the result was sectarian abstention from the requirements of the situation which was the initial defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism. The imperialist aspects of the war was secondary when compered to this context and so meant that it was necessary for the working class to defend bourgeois democracy as the basis to oppose fascism and so in this manner prepare the basis to crate a workers government that could successfully complete the process of the defeat of fascism and in that manner advance the interests of world revolution. But instead of this perspective the fact that both the UK and Germany were imperialist powers led to a perspective that was abstract and sectarian and so had little relevance to the actual situation. The point is that the working class of the UK were opposed to the possibility of the victory of German fascism and therefore supported the war aims of the British government. But the sectarian and abstract aspect of the approach of the Trotskyists meant that it could not relate to this sentiment and the result was that they could not outline a principled perspective for the revolutionary defence of bourgeois democracy as the basis to promote the possibility for the formation of a workers government. Instead the position of the Trotskyists in relation to the second world war lacked clarity. This point has been made in relation to the views of Grant and Mandel. However, we have tried to outline what we consider to be a principled strategy concerning the second world war.

It will be suggested that the above represents accommodation to the interests of the national bourgeoisie of the UK. But this would only be a correct criticism if it meant the acceptance of the role of the national interest as an alternative to the primacy of the class struggle. But the point being made is that the defence of bourgeois democracy is defined in terms of the enhancement of the influence and social power of the working class within society. Such a defence is premised on the objective of the realisation of dual power which would then become the prelude to the formation of a workers government. In contrast an actual justification of class collaboration would mean the undermining of the social power of the workers in terms of upholding the domination of capital. Instead the defence of bourgeois democracy is based on the understanding of the continued importance of class antagonisms within society. This means that any support for the bourgeois government is based on the recognition of the primacy of the interests of the working class and the objectives of the advance of the formation of a worker’s government. But the very difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism means that it is not unprincipled for the working class to defend bourgeois democracy against the antagonism of the fascist powers. Only the success of the struggle against fascism can undermine the possibility of reactionary counterrevolution and so generate the progress of the process of world socialist revolution.