**THE ISSUE OF THE DEFENCE OF THE SOVIET UNION**

The onset of the Second World War raised the question of the defence of the Soviet Union as an important question for the contending forces of American Trotskyism. The orthodox supporters of the Socialist workers party maintained that the major issue was the necessity to defend the nationalised property relations of the Soviet Union from the possibility of the restoration of capitalism because of this possibility which could occur because of the invasion of the USSR by the various imperialist armies on its borders. But their opponents in the American Workers party contended that this perspective did not indicate the reactionary nature of the bureaucratic social formation of the USSR which meant that it could promote a policy of imperialism and military expansion which would mean that it was not principled to support the approach of the Soviet bureaucracy. However, the Workers Party would defend the USSR against the problems posed by the prospect of invasion by imperialist armies. But the problem is that the Workers party reacted to the uncritical defence of the USSR by the SWP in terms of denying the importance of the defence of the USSR which they suggested had become part of a situation of an inter-imperialist war in which they were promoting expansionist aims. This standpoint seemed to deny the importance of the defence of the USSR against the problem of invasion by reactionary fascist armies. In other words, the issue was to combine the standpoint of defence of the USSR with a principled approach that was not uncritical of the manner in which the Red army did carry out the task of opposing the prospect of invasion. In this context it would be necessary to support the national liberation of Eastern Europe and to reject the ambitions of the Stalinist Red army to establish its domination of this territory. In other words, it was necessary to reject the apparent passivity of the Workers Party, whilst also rejecting the apparently uncritical stance of the American SWP with regards to the issue raised by the defence of the USSR. The problems in both positions was an indication that the parties claiming to be an integral continuation of the role of the Fourth International always had political problems since the inception of this organisation. There was a tendency to vacillate between either sectarian abstentionism on the issue of the defence of the USSR, or alternatively to advocate this standpoint in a dogmatic and uncritical manner. In other words, the question arises as to whether it could have been possible to develop a political position that was able to overcome the contrasting limitations of with4er sectarianism or opportunism. Was it possible to uphold the standpoint of defence of the USSR in the second world war without accommodating to a perspective of effective uncritical support for Stalinism? The point being made was that the invasion of the USSR by the armies of fascist and imperialist Germany would seem to suggest the importance of a perspective of defence of the USSR, but the Workers Party effectively rejected this approach because it connected the issues of the situation of the USSR with the interests of one of the contending imperialist blocs in this war. This understanding is not inaccurate, but such a stance seems to be unsympathetic to the situation of the people of the USSR who had to confront the issue of invasion by a repressive and reactionary force. In this situation was it possible to defend the USSR without accommodating to the interests of Stalinism? It is necessary to recognise that in some instances the opposition to the invasion of the fascist forces assumed the form of a genuine people’s war based on the organisation of the popular defence of the USSR. In other instances, this defence was carried out by the Red army. But support for the defence of the USSR does not imply uncritical acceptance of all of the actions of the Red army, and it does not imply acceptance of the domination of Eastern Europe by the USSR. Instead it was necessary to establish a contrast between necessary measures of defence of the USSR from actions that implied the generation of Soviet military expansion in terms of the control of Eastern Europe. The only principled role of the USSR should have been to support the forces of genuine national liberation of Eastern Europe by the peoples of the countries of this area. But instead the lack of support of the Red army for the Polish people of the Warsaw uprising was an indication that the Stalinist forces aimed to control the development of opposition to the fascist armies. The red army was opposed to any expression of the process of genuine national liberation. In this manner the actions of the Red army were an indication of the imperialist character of the process of expansion into Eastern Europe. The only principled expression of the role of the Red army in this context would have been to provide effective support for the process of the generation of the possibility of the liberation of Eastern Europe.

It could be argued that this position was not possible because of the reactionary character of the role of the Red army. Hence, the only possible actions it could express were those of an expansionist and belligerent manner. This point has validity which is why it would have required a process of political change to transform the Red army into a force that was capable of supporting the aims of national liberation in an effective manner. It could have been possible to establish some form of popular control over the actions of the Red army in the context of the demands of the aims of the process of defending the USSR against the problem of fascist imperialist invasion. But, in contrast the progressive task of the defence of the USSR ultimately became transformed into the expansionist approach of the military domination of Eastern Europe. The Red army did not act in Eastern Europe merely to uphold the defence of the USSR, but instead became primarily concerned to create buffer states that would act in terms of the interests of the Soviet Union. In this context the Red army did not act in terms of supporting the forces of national liberation. Only in Yugoslavia was it possible to carry out a genuine process of national liberation. However, the ultimate reactionary role of the Red army did not mean that it was opportunist for the forces of Trotskyism to support its general role in terms of the task of the defence of the USSR against the process of imperialist invasion. However, this perspective did not mean adopting the uncritical stance of the SWP. Instead it was necessary to evaluate the actions of the Red army in terms of the perspectives of revolutionary Marxism. This means that any repressive activity carried out by the Red army should be critically analysed, and the perspective of the process of national liberation should be defined in terms of the possibility to establish forms of genuine participation of the people in the actions of the process of generating the potential for the national liberation of the USSR. However, the SWP was unable to establish this critical approach because they assumed that the Red army was effectively a progressive social force, and so they tended to consider its actions as having an inherently principled character. This approach was an opportunist form of accommodation to the interests of Stalinism. But the Workers Party tended to oppose the role of the USSR because of its connections to the forces of imperialism, either German imperialism between 1939-41, or Allied imperialism between 1941-45. This standpoint neglects the independent character of the actions of the Soviet Union which meant that it was able to develop a distinctive political and military approach in this period. However, the problem was that the various forces of American Trotskyism seemed unable to explain the actions of the Soviet bureaucratic regime in terms of the actual complexities of the political and military situation. Instead they upheld a justification of dogmatic perspectives that expressed an inability to understand the complexity of the situation. On the one hand the Workers party seemed unable to accept the importance of the defence of the USSR, whilst the SWP rejected any effective criticism of the role of the Red army. It could have become possible to develop an approach that was able to overcome these limitations and instead adopt a flexible and principled position that was able to relate to the complexities of the situation. But the failure to uphold this type of standpoint was an indication of the beginning of a crisis within the parties that claimed to be part of the heritage of the Fourth International. Two contrasting conceptions of orthodoxy meant that the possibility to develop positions that were connected to the actual situation became to be increasingly difficult.

However the above limitations outlined did not seem to be an issue when Max Shachtman in his article: ‘Hitler and Stalin invade Poland’(The fate of the Russian revolution volume 1, edited by Sean Matgamna Phoenix Press p240-248) Shachtman was able to outline in emphatic terms how it was reactionary for both the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR to cooperate in the invasion and division of Poland. But this reactionary action will not undermine the continuation of the problem that the Nazi regime is still aspiring to invade the USSR. The assumption being made is that the influence of the working class of the world needs to be expressed in terms of the possibility of ending this alliance of the USSR with fascist Germany and instead creating the conditions for the development of a genuine process of military and political struggle against the forces of fascist imperialism. This viewpoint implies that the USSR should be influenced to develop the prospect of a genuine anti-fascist war in order to create the conditions for the liberation of all the countries under the domination of fascist imperialism, like Poland. But obviously such a possibility would mean that the process of revolutionary change would have to be advanced in the USSR so that it could become an agency of genuine struggle of the people against the forces of fascism. This perspective assumes that despite the reactionary character of Stalinism it could become a force for progressive action in terms of being a component of the military and political struggle against fascism. But the onset of the second world war, and the consolidation of the alliance of the USSR and Germany in relation to the partition of Poland and the effective support of the Soviet bureaucracy for the military objectives of the regime of fascist Germany led Shachtman to revise this original position. In an article: ‘The Soviet Union and the World war’ (p249-258) he argues that the role of the USSR is to support one of the contending parties to the second world war. The role of the USSR cannot be considered to be differentiated from its relations to the forces of a distinct imperialist power in what bas become an inter-imperialist war. It is argued that the USSR is acting as an agency in the interests of German imperialism and in this context is carrying out reactionary actions of expansion and domination of other countries. In this context there is nothing progressive about the actions of the Soviet bureaucracy and instead it should be criticised as acting in the interests of the forces of German imperialism.

Shachtman defines his position in the following terms: “What is called an “episode” today is indeed an integral episode of development of the second imperialist world war, in which the Soviet Union is fighting the battle of German imperialism. The present war may be transformed, at a later stage, into an imperialist war against the Soviet Union, in which case it will be the duty of the international working class to defend the Soviet Union even under Stalin. But it would be absurd to apply to the war today the policy applicable to the war into which it may be transformed.” (p256) This perspective would seem to be principled and correct. In the period 1939-41 the actions of the Soviet bureaucracy were to uphold the interests of German imperialism and this has been indicated by the cooperative division of Poland. But there is an awareness that this mutual policy can only be temporary, and that at a certain point the forces of German imperialism will invade the USSR. Hence it would seem logical that under these changed and different circumstances it would become principled that the perspective of defence of the Soviet Union was not an accommodation to Stalinism but was instead an expression of the new situation. This point is emphasised by Shachtman when he emphasises that: “If, at a later stage, the present war should be transformed into an assault upon the Soviet Union, the slogan of defencism would have to be raised again, for it is not in the interests of the socialist world revolution to have one-sixth of the world, which the October uprising removed from the control of imperialism, restored to capitalist exploitation. In the present war, however, the world proletariat, the Russian included, cannot take upon itself a shadow of responsibility for the participation of the Soviet bureaucracy in the imperialist conflict. The revolutionary vanguard must put forward the slogan of revolutionary defeatism in both imperialist camps, that is, the continuation of the revolutionary struggle for power regardless of the effects on the military front.”(p257-258) This comment is an indication that the military policy of the Soviet bureaucracy should be opposed between 1939-41 because this is an expression of support and defence of the objectives of one of the imperialist blocs in the second world war. The role of the Soviet Union is to uphold the aims of German imperialism in a reactionary and expansionist manner. However, the assumption is also made that if the USSR is to be invaded by German imperialism the issue of defence of the USSR would then become relevant. But the Workers party led by Shachtman did not make this conclusion when the actual invasion of the USSR occurred. We have to explain this apparent inconsistency.

The answer to this question is that Shachtman does not analyse the issues involved in the invasion of the USSR by the forces of German imperialism and instead contends that the USSR has become subordinated to the objectives of Allied imperialism in this situation: “Now that Hitler’s bayonets are against his breast, Stalin has lost all vestige of independence. It is his fate to become an obedient instrument in the hands of the London and Washington governments. …Stalin is now nothing else but an Asiatic despot forced to submit to the will of the Western imperialist governments in order to maintain his power.”(p344) But not only is this view inaccurate because the Soviet administration retains its level of independent military and political initiative, but this dogmatic perspective means that the importance of the internal situation in the Soviet Union is no longer significant in the analysis of Shachtman. The actual military struggle between the Red army and the forces of German imperialism are not evaluated in terms of the importance of the developments expressed by the German imperialist invasion of the USSR, and instead because of this dogmatic reduction of the role of the USSR to being nothing more than an instrument of the forces of Allied imperialism the issue of the defence of the USSR can be effectively rejected or at least ignored. But the actual situation is defined by the German invasion of the USSR, which would seem to mean that the issue of defence of the USSR has become important. But instead of making this observation of the actual empirical situation, Shachtman adopts a dogmatic view that ignores the dynamics of the developments that have occurred with the 1941 invasion of the USSR by Germany. The result of his apparently rigid approach is that he cannot call for the defence of the USSR in relation to the role of the present Stalinist regime. Instead he defines the character of events in terms of possibilities. Thus: “Whatever may be the end of the Russo-German war, the regime of the Stalinist bureaucracy is doomed. Russian victory against Hitler would only be made possible by a profound revolution of the masses and the consequent restoration of the conquests of October and of the rights and benefits that the Bolshevist regime sought to give them in the beginning. If this fails to come, what the Soviet Union may expect is defeat by Hitler’s guns, or, possibly dismemberment even in case of an Allied victory.”(p345) This apparent rigid prediction of possible developments is not an adequate substitute for the necessity of a definite and principled support for the defence of the USSR in the unconditional terms of critical support for its actual opposition in the present to the aims and objectives of the forces of German imperialism. This type of critical support does not mean the acceptance of the role of Stalinism or ejection of the necessity to advance the principles of the political independence and initiatives of the working class. But what is understood is the obligations of the immediate situation in which the forces of German imperialism have invaded the USSR. In contrast, Shachtman has adopted a pessimist perspective that can only envisage the victory of German imperialism unless Stalinism can be overthrown. But what is not explained is how can people by motivated to overthrow Stalinism when the process of aggressive military invasion is occurring. Surely it would be more realistic to provide critical support to the defence of the USSR in order to then generate more favourable conditions for the process of the overthrow of Stalinism? But this perspective is not outlined by Shachtman who instead outlines in a dogmatic manner the necessity of the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism in order to create the conditions to defeat fascism. This is a dogmatic perspective that ignores the importance of the immediate empirical reality which is to defend the USSR against the problem of the German imperialist invasion. In other words, he glosses over the significance of the issue of the defence of the USSR and instead emphasises other issues such as the relation of the USSR to the forces of Allied imperialism. This dogmatism means that Shachtman does not seem able to understand the significance of immediate empirical reality. The central and practical issue is to defend the USSR which he seems to consider as being no longer of importance, and is an apparent rejection of his position in 1939.

However, this apparent rejection of the position of the defence of the USSR after the invasion of the armies of German imperialism in 1941 is still outlined in an ambiguous and inconsistent manner. It is argued that despite the exploitation of the workers and peasants by the Stalinist bureaucracy the people are still prepared to oppose the invasion of the USSR: “The surprising fact, however, that gives us all hope, is that even under these circumstances, the heroic masses, refusing to accept the yoke of the new fascist invaders, resist them with great courage. They are moved by two profound and progressive feelings: an old natural patriotism of people who have only such elementary and legitimate things to defend as their bread and land, and the anti-fascist hatred originated from the workers old instinct of liberation.”(p346) This comment seems to suggest that despite the repressive limitations of the Stalinist regime it is still possible to conduct a genuine and progressive struggle for the defence of the USSR against the possibility of domination by the reactionary Nazi regime. Indeed, Shachtman has outlined quite eloquently that the aspirations of the people are to promote the possibility of an authentic struggle of national self-defence and the possibility to overcome the prospect of being dominated by the fascist and imperialist army of Germany. However this apparent paradox is resolved in terms of the elaboration of the view that whilst the fascist armies can defeat the armies of Stalin they cannot undermine the resolve of the people to oppose a foreign invader: “By destroying with his guns the Stalinist totalitarian regime, Hitler…..will have set loose the forces of history, bringing forth the torrents of revolution. Socialism and the Russian proletariat will stand firm, and the future is theirs. Russia of October will resurge.”(p347) But this prediction was only true in a partial manner because even under the repressive limitations of the continuation of the role of the Stalinist regime the possibility to conduct a type of peoples struggle against fascism occurred despite the limitations of the repressive role of the bureaucratic regime. In this manner the possibility to develop a type of peoples struggle against fascism occurred. Shachtman calls for the formation of a genuine workers and peasants’ government in order to carry out a genuine struggle against fascism, but it was this perspective that was not realised. Instead it was necessary to develop a position on the character of the struggle as it occurred, and in terms of how we might like it to have been carried out. This meant supporting the Soviet Union despite its bureaucratic limitations because the victory of fascism would have meant the undermining of any possibility of making genuine historical progress based on the realisation of socialism. The point is that fascism was more counterrevolutionary than Stalinism and this was why it was necessary to defend the USSR despite its bureaucratic and counterrevolutionary limitations. But this point does not seem to be appreciated by Shachtman who instead outlines a perspective based on hypothetical possibilities. His view is that only if the workers and peasants overthrow the Stalinist regime will it become possible to defend the USSR. However, what this standpoint seems to ignore is that the actual situation of the invasion of the Soviet Union by the forces of German imperialism means that the possibility of a revolutionary type of development is very unlikely. In this context it is necessary to defend the USSR despite the reactionary issue of the bureaucratic regime. Indeed, this type of popular defence of the Soviet Union would then make the possibility of the overthrow of the Stalinist regime more likely in relation to the level of success that a war of national liberation would realise. The mobilisation of the Soviet people to defend the USSR in an unconditional manner could then create the political conditions that would make the possibility of the overthrow of the bureaucratic regime a possibility. Indeed, the repressive actions of German imperialism means that no other outcome is feasible. Only the success of the immediate defence of the USSR could then create the conditions to make the process of revolutionary change a more realistic possibility. Indeed, the potential for this development means that Stalin still acts to ensure the strict control of the people so that the possibility of a popular and revolutionary struggle against fascism does not occur. Therefore, in this situation the most principled anti-Stalinist demand is to advocate the development of a peoples struggle against the possibility of the domination of fascism. But Shachtman does not outline this type of approach because his emphasis is on the overall character of the conflict as that of an inter-imperialist war between the Allied bloc with that of the forces of fascist imperialism.

The result of this apparent failure to recognise the aspect of the importance of the defence of the USSR under the circumstances of the invasion of fascist Germany is that Shachtman promotes the most confusing perspective: “In that case, without yet becoming a defencist, while continuing to denounce Stalin’s reactionary war and reactionary war aims, I would try to appeal to the soldiers as Lenin did in 1917, not to engage in futile mutinies or riots or in any sporadic actions, to hold the front, so that Germans do not break through and crush the proletarian elements of the dual power and to speed the day when the Russian proletariat can crush the Stalinist elements of the dual power and change the war into a revolutionary war against imperialism.”(p351) Hence, in a limited and ambiguous manner, Shachtman is advocating a type of defence of the USSR in terms of the role of the Red army in opposing the offensive aims of the forces of German imperialism. But the problem with this limited approach is that it does not suggest the necessity to carry out measures that would enhance the effective ability to carry out the decisive defeat of the German army. Instead the role of the Soviet forces should be limited to the minimum actions necessary in order to try and undermine the expansion of the role of the forces of German imperialism. Any suggestion of more active measures to try and defeat the German army would imply that the Red army had become simply the agency of the interests of Allied imperialism. This approach is genuinely confusing and in a reluctant manner accepts the importance of a type of limited defence of the USSR. But what is not outlined is the necessity to defeat the forces of German imperialism by the development of an effectively popular form of struggle for national defence. This standpoint does not imply that the Stalinist Red army has become an expression of the aim of national liberation and the interests of the working class. Instead what is being suggested is that under adverse circumstances when it is difficult to develop the formation of a revolutionary party with influence in the working class, it is necessary to support the defence of the USSR under the limitations of the political hegemony of Stalinism. Within these adverse circumstances it will be necessary to try and enhance the realisation of some of the objectives of revolutionary Marxism such as the generation of the independent mobilisation of the working class in order to try and realise a limited policy of the advance of the interests of the working class and peasants. In contrast in a dogmatic manner the supporters of Shachtman contend that without the realisation of proletarian revolution, the military struggle of the USSR can only be of a reactionary character: “if proletarian revolution does not triumph, and thereby overturn the regime of the new autocrats, that is if the rule of Stalin continues, it will make no difference to the masses whether Russia is victorious in the war or is defeated.”(p419) This comment is incredibly dogmatic, and implies that it is a matter without political significance if the success of German imperialism in invading the USSR is achieved. This type of comment seems to ignore the repressive character of the invasion of the USSR by Germany, and that this means the issue of the defence of the USSR has become of practical concern to the workers of the Soviet Union. Therefore, facilitating the possibility to generate the increased influence of the workers of the USSR is connected to the development of their success in the war with German imperialism. The domination of German fascism would have represented a tragic defeat of the interests of the workers of the USSR, and this is why it was important to try and develop the strength and influence of the working class by the promotion of its effective ability to oppose the aims of German imperialism. This point is acknowledged by the supporters of Shachtman in inconsistent terms, but this view is combined with an indifference about the problems involved in defending the USSR from the possibility of domination by the forces of German imperialism. The problem is that the issues created by the character of reality are not tackled in terms of their complexity and instead what is being justified is a hypothetical conception of social reality that seems to be unable to tackle questions in terms of their actual development. In this context the importance of the defence of the USSR because of the reactionary invasion of the forces of German imperialism is generally ignored by the supporters of the Workers Party.

This criticism of the views of the Workers Party does not mean that the SWP was principled in its conception of the defence of the Soviet Union. Instead they did seem to consider this perspective in terms of a tendency to accommodate to the interests of Stalinism which was defined in some limited manner as upholding the objectives of proletarian revolution in relation to the task of the defence of the Soviet Union. Hence it was necessary to reject the opportunism and dogmatism of both the Workers party and the SWP and instead outlined a principled conception of the aim of the defence of the USSR during world war two. This position would include criticism of any of the unacceptable methods of the Red army such as the repression of the population of the peoples of Eastern Europe and the refusal to support the Warsaw uprising in 1944. At the end of the second world war it would have been necessary to advocate the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe and to support the formation of democratic socialist societies. To some extent the Fourth International did begin to adopt these types of policies. However, the dogmatism of the Workers Party was an indication that it was unable to consistently promote principled policies as an alternative to the limitations of the SWP. But it was able to explain the domination of Eastern Europe by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the post-war period in terms of the perspective of the conception of bureaucratic collectivism. In contrast, the theory of the USSR degenerated workers state created difficulties in relation to understanding these developments by the orthodox policies of the Fourth International. But the ultimate problem was that the Workers party was an American organisation that had no genuine interest in becoming an integral component of the Fourth International. The result was that the period 1940-1950 expressed a situation of crisis of the component parties of Trotskyism. This situation led to the domination of Pabloism in 1953. But this did not mean that it had become necessary to advocate the formation of a fifth international. This was because the transitional programme of the Fourth International remained a principled policy and perspective that could have facilitated the regeneration of the forces of revolutionary Marxism. In this context the aim was to continue the process of the re-elaboration of the programme in relation to the continually changing circumstances. In this manner it would have been possible to consolidate the role of a genuine expression of revolutionary Marxism. Instead the contrasting approaches of an emphasis on the conception of state capitalism, bureaucratic collectivism, or degenerated workers state, was not sufficient for the regeneration of the Fourth International. The issue of the definition of the USSR was important, but it was not sufficient to create the political conditions to consolidate a revolutionary international. Effective confusion about the class character of the Cuban revolution led to the most serious crisis of the forces of the competing sections of a fragmented Fourth International. None of the groups seemed to recognise that the character of Cuba had become defined by its relation to the USSR, or a process of structural assimilation into its social formation. Only Tim Wohlforth seemed to understand the importance of this approach for defining the class character of the Stalinist social formation. Therefore, the task of Trotskyism is to develop a principled understanding of the post war period in order to facilitate the creation of a genuinely revolutionary form of Marxism. It could be suggested that this task has never been satisfactorily realised. An attempt to tackle this task will be one of the objectives of the supporters of Socialist Standpoint.