**Understanding the Second World War**

It seemed quite uncomplicated for Marxists to understand the character of the first world war. It was a military conflict between rival imperialist and capitalist powers and so the principled position was to oppose this war and instead argue in favour of the revolutionary alternative of striving to realise the success of the forces of international socialism. But the issues became more complicated with the second world war. Some of the major capitalist states in this conflict were fascist powers and so it seemed not unreasonable to support the victory of the bourgeois democratic countries because this would represent the advance of the objectives of progress as opposed to the interests of what were very reactionary states. However, Trotsky in 1939 supported the orthodox Leninist position of revolutionary defeatism and so rejected the standpoint of supporting bourgeois democratic states in their military conflict with the major fascist powers. Some would suggest that this approach was dogmatic and did not allow for the differences that were apparent when this conflict was compared to that of the first world war. Indeed, the Trotskyist position became very complicated when it was combined with the approach of the proletarian military policy that called for the democratisation of the armed forces of the bourgeois democratic countries so that it may become possible to envisage the development of a genuinely popular struggle against fascism. But this approach was never developed and so the Trotskyists entered world war two with adherence to two possible policies that may have had a contradictory character. In actuality the Trotskyist forces supported the militant struggles of the workers that continued in this period and tended to under-emphasise the approach of revolutionary defeatism. This was combined with solidarity support for the workers in the fascist countries and their attempt to develop resistance struggles in order to try and undermine the power of reaction in their countries. But primarily the Trotskyists supported the defence of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state in the struggle with fascist imperialism. It could be suggested that this principled position was not flexible enough to recognise the necessity to defeat fascism in the second world war, and so the important aspect of the various struggles for democracy and national independence were not sufficiently recognised by what could be considered to be the limitations of a dogmatic approach. In other words, the Trotskyist forces failed to sufficiently understand the differences between the first and second world wars, which meant that in general their politics proved to be an irrelevance in relation to the tasks posed by the period 1939-45.

The possibility to evaluate this issue is developed in a collection of important books about the second world war that have been written by Marxists in the last forty years. The first of these Marxists is Ernest Mandel who wrote: ‘The Meaning of the Second World War’ (Verso, London 1986). Mandel is attempting to defend the approach that the Trotskyists had in relation to the second world war. He is not concerned with the possibility of self-criticism. However, the issue that has to be addressed is whether the Trotskyists sufficiently recognised the anti-fascist possibilities of a situation in which the domination of Europe by the major fascist powers meant that struggles of a national liberation character would inevitably develop. In this context did the approach that had been adopted with regards to the first world war act to develop a convincing position with regards to the second world war. Or instead, was a form of dogmatism being defended which meant that the Trotskyists were essentially irrelevant in political terms in relation to the promotion of a perspective that could be considered to be dogmatic despite its formal principled character? Mandel attempts to begin to address this issue by suggesting that understanding the second world war is because of the unresolved issues of the first world war. The first world war was the outcome of the rivalry of major capitalist and imperialist powers and so the development of the second world war was the expression of the fact that the conclusion of the first world war could not resolve these contradictions and antagonisms. This perspective is not necessarily inaccurate, but it does not explain a major aspect of the second world war which was that it was between fascist and bourgeois democratic nation states. Then the involvement of the Soviet Union was in support of these bourgeois democratic powers. Therefore, could it be suggested that this important political difference between the first and second world wars implied that a principled political perspective should be different in relation to the situation between 1939-45? We will have to evaluate whether Mandel sufficiently allows for the importance of these differences. In other words, the major issue that has to be addressed is whether his approach is able to sufficiently explain the importance of the apparent differences between the first and second world wars. The point is that the German imperialist domination of Europe between 1939-45 led to significant struggles for national liberation and democracy. Thus, in much of Europe what was apparent was the emergence of the popular movements of the role of the working class in countries like Italy and Greece. Hence the issue that had to be addressed was whether these developments should modify the approach towards the war that had been adopted in 1939. It could be argued that the Trotskyist movement did not adequately incorporate these developments into what should have been a changing political stance. However, in practice the Trotskyists often had an honourable role in the resistance movements, as indicated by its principled involvement in France. But it could be suggested that this meant that in actuality there was a contradiction between theory and practice. Is Mandel aware of these possible tensions or does he try to effectively deny them? This is an issue that has to be addressed.

In the introduction to his book, Mandel makes the point that the issue of the military, economic and political competition of the major imperialist powers had not been resolved by the end of the first world war. Therefore the dynamics for the development of a second world war was inherent to the continued aspect of rivalry between the most important imperialist countries: “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 Germany, Japan and Britain, with France and Italy playing the role of secondary allies lacking the strength to be real contenders.” (p14) But the point was that the dynamic of expansion was based primarily on the role of German and Japanese imperialism in the 1930’s to obtain increased areas for exploitation and domination. Therefore, British and American imperialism was in a position of a defensive stance that was opposed to the process of expansion of the more belligerent imperialist powers. Did this aspect mean that a differentiated approach could be justified in relation to the imminent second world war? Mandel would reply in the negative to this question and instead suggest that it was apparent that Germany and the USA were the major contenders for world domination. He comments: “But if the meaning of the Second World War, like that of its predecessor, can be grasped only in the context of the imperialist drive for world domination, its significance lies in the fact that was the ultimate test of the relative strength of the competing imperialist states. Its outcome determined the particular pattern of the world accumulation of capital for a whole period.” (p17) But the point is that whilst this may have defined the most important aspects of the second world war, it cannot be convincingly suggested that this was the essentially exclusive aspect to the character of the conflict. Instead, the point is that the activity of the people of many countries became important in influencing the character of the military and political situation. What developed as a genuine development of the struggle for national liberation meant that the inter-imperialist aspect of the conflict became to be modified and influenced by this important development. Indeed, this meant that the possibility of proletarian revolution became to be an aspect of the situation that suggested the character of the war was being changed by the importance of the activity of the people. Therefore, it would be dogmatic and a mistake to continue to assert that what had been true in 1939 might also be valid for the changing circumstances of 1943-45. In other words what has to be understood is that the important intervention of what became forms of mass struggle had altered the character of the military and political situation in significant terms. We will have to establish if this point is made sufficiently in the analysis of Mandel.

Mandel outlines the developments that led to the outbreak of the second world war and indicates that the German government had the primary responsibility for this development. This aspect was facilitated by the accommodation of the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR to the aims of expansion by the German state. They established an agreement which led to the partition of Poland. But this agreement was ended by the development of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. This led to the popular struggles of the people of Eastern Europe against the attempt to consolidate the domination of German Imperialism: “The inhabitants of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union – who were supposed to be expelled, exterminated or turned into slave labour in the forging of the new German empire – chose instead to resist at any cost. They rose in their millions, forced dozens of German divisions to withdraw from the front, and by their admirable struggle became one of the key factors which tipped the scales against German imperialist plans.” (p38) But this comment is ambiguous because the issue of whether it could be possible to connect these developments to a consistent opposition to the aims of German imperialism is not established. In other words, would it not be logical for the resistance movements to collaborate with the governments of the capitalist powers that were in opposition to the military aims of German imperialism? Indeed, this was what occurred, and so for example the resistance movement in France established close military and political relations with the British government. But Mandel seems to ignore this aspect and instead emphasises the development of the class struggle in the countries occupied by the forces of the German government: “Under the military push of German revanchism the rotten foundations of the bourgeois order created in large parts of Europe at the end of the world war one gave way. Its successor grew out of actions from below, as workers and poor peasants formed alliances for the goals of national liberation and radical social reform: goals which the local bourgeoisies and landowning classes were neither able or willing to endorse……But the bulk of the population of the occupied countries choose instead to fight – and thus to take an active part in the reshaping of Europe after the war…..By 1943 the social rather than the national divide became permanent and acquired a revolutionary dynamic directed not only against the return of the old order but also against any more reform of it.”(p38) Thus it is suggested that the development of popular struggles against fascism did not receive any effective support from the bourgeois democratic powers. This view is a dogmatic simplification which ignores the military and political cooperation of the western imperialist powers with the anti-fascist struggle in countries like Greece and Yugoslavia. Indeed, it can be suggested that it was quite principled and necessary for the various resistance movements to attempt to utilise the financial and military support of the democratic imperialist powers in order to promote the possibility of the success of their struggles. In contrast Mandel seems to ignore the importance of these issues and instead defines just wars as that being carried out by the Soviet Union and various oppressed nations against colonial domination. The point is that there were many anti-fascist struggles in Europe that were being carried out in terms of the development of an alliance between these movements and the bourgeois democratic governments. This aspect meant that issue of what was a principled approach towards the bourgeois democratic governments was very complex. They could not be considered to be identical to the role of the fascist imperialist states because of this aspect of support for national liberation and resistance movements. On the one hand it was not principled to support them unconditionally because this would mean a justification of the imperialist character of these states. However, they could not be opposed in a manner that was similar to the approach adopted towards the fascist governments. Instead, it was necessary to uphold a critical approach that still had an aspect of flexibility, such as support for the financial support supplied by the bourgeois democracies to the various resistance movements. But this aspect should be defined in unconditional terms and did not imply that the bourgeois democratic governments should be supported in a general manner. In this context it would be a principled and necessary perspective for the workers of the bourgeois democratic nation states to demand that their governments provide financial and military support for the role of the national liberation movements opposed to the fascist imperialist powers.

Mandel defines his approach to the second world war in the following terms: “By ‘just wars’ are meant wars which should have been fought, and which revolutionaries supported them as they do now. This categorisation avoids the ambiguity of the formula according to which the forces active in the war are divided into ‘fascist’ or ‘anti-fascist’, the division being based on the notion 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’,….amounts in reality to systematic class collaboration: the political parties, and especially the Communist parties which maintained that the Western imperialist powers were waging a just war against Nazism, ended by forming coalition governments after 1945 wherein they actively participated in the reconstruction of the bourgeois state and the capitalist economy.”(p45-46) But this opportunist approach of Stalinism was because of its political character and was not primarily the result of cooperation with the democratic imperialist powers in relation to the struggle against fascism. The point is that it was quite logical and practical for the various resistance movements led by the Stalinists to try and obtain financial and political support from the various bourgeois democratic imperialist powers in relation to the possibility to develop the struggle against the occupation of their countries by the fascist imperialist states. This aspect contributed to the development of the success of the various national liberation movements. Hence, in contrast to the rigid approach of Mandel, there was a struggle of fascism and anti-fascism, and it was the task of any principled Marxists to support the success of the anti-fascists. This possibility would involve obtaining financial and political support from the bourgeois democratic powers. In other word this aspect was what was not problematical. Instead, the aspect of opportunism in this situation was the political character of the Stalinist parties who were not prepared to connect the task of national liberation with the aim of the realisation of proletarian revolution. In other words, their aims were limited to the restoration of national independence in terms of the role of bourgeois democratic regimes, and so in this context they were against the aim of the realisation of proletarian revolution. It was not the aim of anti-fascism that was of an opportunist character, but instead it was the limitations of Stalinism which meant that they were opposed to the development of the possibility of socialist change. Therefore, opportunities for the establishment of a connection between national liberation struggles and the possibility of proletarian revolution were not established. There was actually a revolutionary dynamic to the anti-fascist struggle which the Stalinist parties were opposed to and was expressed by their opportunist political role in this situation which increasingly favoured a process of transition to socialism. Only with the cold war did the Soviet bureaucracy act to overthrow capitalism in an elitist and reactionary manner.

In other words, the very task of proletarian revolution that would have had to be tackled by a principled revolutionary organisation was to connect the anti-fascist struggle to the aim of proletarian revolution. Hence this aspect was actually the form in which the development of the possibility of proletarian revolution was being expressed. But Mandel’s assumptions that this approach was inherently unprincipled does not establish what should have been an alternative in terms of the aspect of strategy and perspectives. The point is that to merely call for socialist change would have been dogmatic and so not connected to the situation of the occupation of much of Europe by the fascist imperialist powers. Therefore, this very situation indicated that the task of the realisation of national independence would be connected to the advance of the interests of the workers to the point that national liberation was related to the realisation of proletarian revolution. Indeed, this very point was understood by the Stalinists which was why they opposed the attempt to develop the connection between the realisation of national independence and proletarian revolutionary change. Hence there was nothing inherently opportunist or problematical about anti-fascism in its actual principled understanding. Instead, what was opportunist was the role of Stalinism which acted to undermine the development of the connection between national liberation and anti-fascism with the promotion of socialist objectives.

Mandel summarises his understanding of the character of the second world war in the following terms: “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 rose 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 the revolutionary possibilities which emerged during it.”(p64-65) This development of accommodation to the objectives of the democratic imperialist powers was an aspect of the situation but this was contrasted by the attempt of various labour movements to assert their interests as the basis of support for the military aims of the governments of these countries. There was an attempt by the labour movement of the UK and USA to try to transform the character of the war into a genuinely popular anti-fascist struggle. The ultimate failure of this approach did not mean that it had a futile character. Instead it could be suggested that there was a genuine possibility to utilise the influence of the various labour movements, and the democratic aspirations of the soldiers of the allied armies in order to try and transform the character of the war into a genuine expression of opposition to fascism and to attempt to realise democratic and progressive objectives such as the undermining of the importance of capital and to instead establish a situation of progressive reforms such as a shorter working week and the development of a welfare state. But the assumption being made by Mandel is that these types of views were essentially futile because it was not possible to attempt to change the character of the war in terms of the influence of the anti-fascist sentiments of the people. In other words, he is essentially pessimistic about the capacity of the workers to bring about a modification of the imperialist aims of the major bourgeois democratic governments. But this is not how the situation was perceived by the workers of the UK and USA. Instead, they utilised the situation of full employment in order to enhance the influence of the trade unions within the economy and to engage in militant actions. Whilst in the countries under fascist domination the workers acted to form resistance movements and to connect the anti-fascist struggle to the attempt to realise the transformation of society in a progressive manner. Thus, the dogmatic approach of Mandel cannot recognise that the issue of opposing fascism created possibilities for the workers to increase their influence within the various capitalist societies. But it could be argued that the rigid revolutionary defeatist standpoint of the Fourth International meant that these developments of popular aspirations for change as part of the struggle against fascism were not sufficiently recognised. The limitations of a dogmatic approach meant that the necessity to develop the anti-fascist struggle in revolutionary terms was not adequately expressed by the Fourth International. Indeed, Mandel’s analysis of the situation is essentially a justification of the political limitations of the Trotskyist movement. However, in particular situations the Trotskyists had an honourable role in the struggle against fascism. But this aspect was not theoretically connected to the elaboration of a systematic strategy for revolutionary change. Instead, it could be argued that the approach of revolutionary defeatism hindered the development of a more flexible and principled perspective of the primary importance of connecting the struggle against fascism into being the basis of a strategy of revolutionary change. Unfortunately, the admirable political activity of many Trotskyists was unable to resolve these political problems.

Mandel outlines what he considers to be the opportunist character of the perspective of anti-fascism: “For British imperialism and its allies in the minor imperialist countries, the main ideological weapon was anti-fascism. By playing upon the British and European masses unified hatred of Hitlers and other fascist regimes suppression of the labour movement – encroachments upon vital workers rights and freedoms and crimes against humanity – such propaganda by and large succeeded in subordinating basic class antagonisms between capital and labour to the priority of defeating the Nazis. The imperialist character of the British, French and American state……. was successfully effaced by that propaganda – 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 that campaign.” (p86) This aspect of class collaboration was an obvious aspect of the situation during the second world war. But the point is that the popular anti-fascist sentiment of the people also had the potential to develop a principled and independent political perspective in which the objectives of opposing fascism could become connected to militant and progressive aspirations and so ultimately facilitate the development of revolutionary objectives. In empirical terms Mandel does outline the increasing importance of anti-fascist struggles during the second world war, but he does not suggest how they could have result in the advance of the realisation of the aim of socialism. However, this recognition of these developments does mean that his dogmatic rejection of the importance of anti-fascism was a perspective that was not related to actual political events during the second world war. Indeed, Trotskyists often had an honourable role in these struggles and attempted to transform them into the struggle to overthrow capitalism. The point was that the repressive character of the occupation of much of Europe by the German army meant that it was inevitable that the character of political struggle would assume the form of opposition to this situation. Thus, the important issue for the Trotskyists was how to transform what would inevitably be an anti-fascist struggle into becoming a conscious expression of the aim of proletarian revolution. It was necessary to oppose the class collaborationist approach of the Stalinists with a principled approach that would connect the aim of opposition to fascism with the primary objective of developing the conditions for the socialist transformation of society. The popular character of the struggle against fascism in France and Italy was an indication that this perspective of revolutionary change was not unrealistic. But the important role of the Stalinists in the resistance movements enabled the stabilisation of capitalism to occur after the defeat of fascism. Hence there was a potential for the realisation of revolutionary change, but this was not achieved because of the domination of the opportunist role of Social Democracy, and Stalinism. Mandel seems to underestimate the importance of these developments and instead emphasises the success of world revolution in China, and Yugoslavia. (P168) But these developments actually led to the domination of Stalinist parties and so no form of proletarian revolution occurred, even in a distorted form. Therefore, what resulted was a process of the serious defeat of the international working class. The potential to transform the opposition to fascism into a form of international proletarian revolution was not realised, and instead world capitalism was stabilised under the consolidated domination of the role of the American economy. It could be suggested that this development was an indication of the importance of the crisis of leadership of the working class. There was a progressive consciousness within the international working class of the necessity to connect the struggle against fascism with the aim of the transformation of society in progressive terms, but in actuality this aspiration was modified by the resurgence of the role of social democracy which led to a labour government in the UK and a progressive coalition in France. Whilst in Eastern Europe the domination of the Soviet Union ensured that no process of genuine change to socialism could be realised. Thus, a possibility for revolutionary change led to the economic and political stabilisation of world capitalism.

Another book on the issues of the situation between 1939-45 is by Chris Bambery: ‘The Second World War: A Marxist History’ (Pluto Press, London 2014) His approach is similar to Mandel in terms of emphasising the imperialist character of the second world war, but he emphasises in more explicit terms the role of popular mass opposition to the domination of Europe by fascism. Indeed, he indicates the aspect of fascism made the second world war different to the primary aspect of the inter-imperialist rivalry that led to the first world war. He comments: “The Second world war was a product of economic recession which bread heightened imperialist tensions. But Hitler’s advent to power ensured that it was a war quite different from its predecessor two decades before – it became a racial, genocidal war, which threatened the rights and liberties of the working classes and much of the peasantry.” (p9) But did this different character mean that a principled revolutionary perspective also had to be changed? Trotsky considered that a principled strategy would imply the same political approach as that adopted by Lenin in 1914. The perspective that was necessary was that of revolutionary defeatism, or a refusal to support any of the national participants in the second world war, except to uphold the aim of the defence of the Soviet Union in military terms because it was considered to be a degenerated workers state. Bu this approach seemed to be dogmatic because it seemed to ignore the importance of the role of the development of mass popular struggles against fascism in Austria, France and Spain. The failure of the German workers and their parties was actually an indication of the necessity to develop the opposition of the people to the prospect of the ascendency to power. Therefore, these developments seemed to indicate the necessity of a different political approach of revolutionary Marxists with regards to the issue of the second world war. What was indicated was the necessity to develop forms of popular military opposition to fascism. But was this prospect consistent with support for the bourgeois democratic powers military struggle with Germany? Bambery refers to the fact that Hitler’s aim with regards to the second world war was world domination, but this aspect seemed to imply that it was necessary to support the bourgeois democratic powers against the authoritarian role of German fascist imperialism. It could be argued that the forces of the Trotskyist Fourth International never developed a satisfactory perspective with regards to this issue. The central issue was whether the role of the British and American capitalist state in the second world war could in some manner be influenced by the popular aspirations of the workers? Defenders of Trotsky’s approach would suggest that this never became a credible possibility. However, we will initially suggest two situations in which the development of military opposition to fascism could have been developed between 1939-41. Hitler’s invasion of France did not result in the development of effective military opposition. It could have been necessary and important in this situation to call for the democratic organisation of the army by the soldiers in order to develop a popular strategy by which the army could have become a popular organisation that would have been able to develop superior forms of defence of France when compared to the policy of appeasement of the German forces which had been adopted by the bourgeois government. The point is that the major supporters of French capitalism promoted a policy of appeasement which undermined the development of effective defence of France in relation to the issue of the invasion of the German army. In this context it would have been necessary to transform the character of the French army in terms of the establishment of its democratic organisation. This process would be connected to the attempt to develop a worker’s government in France. Therefore, the military situation would no longer be expressed by conflict between two rival imperialist powers, but instead France would become the basis of the role of the genuine influence of the workers. In this manner the defence of France would acquire genuine progressive aspects and it would become possible to conduct a popular military struggle against German imperialism. But instead, the influential role of the French national bourgeoisie meant that the policy of accommodation to German imperialism undermined the development of an effective defence against the invasion by the German army. In this context people were demoralised and the army was unable to effectively act to oppose German military actions. Only the realisation of the effective influence of the workers within society could have improved the morale of the army and so created the political conditions to conduct a policy of defence. But in this context the approach of revolutionary defeatism that had been upheld by Trotsky was unable to provide a genuinely effective perspective, because it was not based on the importance of the issues posed by the aggressive invasion of a country by the reactionary forces of a fascist power. The point was that under these circumstances the defence of even a bourgeois democratic regime acquires progressive aspects in terms of necessary development of the role of the workers in opposing the successful realisation of the expansionist plans of a fascist power. The workers would have no interest in accepting the success of the military aims of fascist imperialism in terms of the possibility of a successful invasion and occupation of a bourgeois democratic power. Instead, the workers needed to organise in political and military terms in order to develop forms of popular opposition to the prospect of the success of the invasion by the German army. Hence in these circumstances the aim of national defence was no longer an expression of the approach of class collaboration but would instead be an aspect in developing the genuine influence of the workers within society. In these terms the organisation of the popular defence of France would mean that this development would necessarily become an aspect of an effective opposition to French capitalism because the national bourgeoisie was in favour of collaboration with the forces of German fascism. If the popular defence of France was successful, then this would mean that the development of a worker’s government would be an inherent aspect of this process of military activity. But instead, the French army was undermined by the influence of a sense of defeatism because of the attitude of the government which was that of accommodation to the aims of German imperialism. However, the approach of revolutionary defeatism was not suitable for this situation. Instead, the defence of France against German imperialist invasion had become a principled and urgent task because this was connected to the aim of the defeat of the forces of counterrevolution. Only the military and political organisation of the workers and the democratic transformation of the character of the French army could have developed the possibility to create a situation in which the French people could establish an effective defensive opposition to the expansionist aims of German imperialism. In this context national defence would not be an expression of class collaboration but instead would be based on the assertion of the independent interests of the French workers who had no interest in the occupation of France by the forces of fascist imperialism. Similarly, if Britain had been invaded by the German army it would have been both principled and necessary for the workers to organise independently to develop forms of effective defence and opposition to this development. The aim would not be the defence of the interests of British capitalism but instead to express opposition to the process of fascist counter-revolutionary expansion and the connected undermining of the interests of the workers. Thus, the popular organisation of the army would have become a principled aim and connected to the objective of the democratic organisation of what would express a form of national defence. This perspective would not express class collaboration, but instead would require an independent stance that expressed no confidence in the military organisation of defence by the coalition government. Indeed, this development would be accompanied by an approach that demanded the Labour party end its involvement in the coalition government and instead act to form an independent administration. Thus, the issue of national defence in both France and Britain would not be based on the undermining of the importance of class struggle but instead would still be a form of class struggle. What would be indicated was that the national bourgeoisie is not seriously committed to national defence in relation to the issue of German fascist invasion and occupation. Instead, the task of national defence can only be carried out in the most principled manner by the organisation of the workers in order to achieve success in this task. But before this issue of fascist invasion became of immediate practical importance it was necessary to demand that the inter-imperialist war be transformed into a genuine anti-fascist war via the democratic organisation of the role of the armies of France and Britain, and the connected support of effective progressive aims for these forces.

In his analysis of the situation in Germany between 1918-39, Bambery concludes that only the German political leadership wanted war in Europe. This was because: “Of the European powers only Germany wanted war…. ‘because Germany was going through a severe economic crisis, of which one possible solution was a war of conquest’” (p50) But this perspective was justified in terms of the reactionary character of the ideology of the German government. Hence the development of the inter-imperialist character of war would have an element of the opposition of fascism to the role of the bourgeois democratic powers. Therefore, it would be necessary for the international working class to develop an independent approach concerning this situation that was not an expression of a class collaborationist approach, but which also was based on the recognition of the importance of national defence against the problem of invasion by the German army. It could be argued that this development was never realised in an effective manner. Instead in France the national bourgeoisie facilitated a policy of accommodation to the expansionist aims of German imperialism, whilst in Britain the Churchill government retained its ascendency and gained prestige as a result of its intransigent stance. Bambery describes the situation in France in the following terms: “France entered the second world war deeply divided. Indigenous fascism was too divided and weak to take power and the working class sullen and unenthusiastic about defending their employer’s interests. The French establishment, frustrated with the failure of domestic fascism to pose an effective governmental option, increasingly began to speculate openly that Hitler might be a salvation from without.” (p78) Thus the political situation in France was not favourable for the development of a form of popular opposition to the possibility of German military invasion. Hence it was necessary for the various working-class parties to promote a strategy for opposition to this possible invasion by the German army. But this prospect was undermined by the Nazi-Soviet pact which led to a pro-German stance being taken by the French communist party, and the small Trotskyist organisations were limited by the rigid adherence to an approach of revolutionary defeatism. The point is made that it seemed preferable for the ruling class of France and the UK to continue to appease Hitler even up to the moment that war was declared. Thus, ‘the leaders of Britain and France (and indeed Russia) were not prepared to fight an anti-fascist war and risk unleashing the popular unrest that would come with it.’(P80) This comment implies that the promotion of a genuine anti-fascist war was possible under the given circumstances. But how was this to be realised? The point is that this type of development could only occur in terms of the promotion of the increased influence of the role of the working class, and its connected ability to be able to define the character of the military and political situation in terms of the development of what would become a genuine expression of an anti-fascist struggle that would have the potential to advance the aim of the realisation of the demise of the domination of capitalism. This development would mean that the workers would have to act in a manner that would transform the balance of class forces in their favour in terms of the very development of a defensive struggle that was committed to the primary aim of defeating the attempt of the fascist armies to invade France and other countries. But instead, the role of the communist party was to essentially accommodate to the situation of the victory of the German army because of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the socialist party was divided and demoralised. The workers lacked a leadership that could initiate opposition to the invasion of the German army. Furthermore, the Trotskyists limited by the dogmatism of revolutionary defeatism could also not uphold the importance of an independent policy for the defence of France against invasion. This situation of confusion and demoralisation within the working class could only contribute to the victory of the forces of fascism. But it could be argued that this situation did not result in the Trotskyists developing an approach that could challenge the rigid aspects of the perspectives of revolutionary defeatism.

The formation of the pro German government of Vichy led by Petain in France indicated the necessity of a struggle against both capitalism and the development of this government of capitulation to the interests of foreign power. But the problem was the role of the communist party who were not effectively opposed to this development because of the approach of the Soviet government and its treaty with Germany. Thus, the workers were demoralised and lacked a principled leadership that could lead a struggle against the collaboration of the Petain government with the German occupation of France. However, with these developments the approach of revolutionary defeatism had become increasingly antiquated because of the establishment of German control of much of Europe. The necessity was to develop popular forms of struggle against the domination of Europe by the German army. Indeed, there was much discontent with the Churchill government which could have resulted in support for the aim of the formation of a more left-wing administration in order to conduct the struggle against fascism in a more progressive manner. The influence of this popular sentiment meant that the Labour party members of the Cabinet became essentially responsible for the conduct of domestic policy. In other words, there was a limited process of movement towards the genuine expression of the influence of the working class in relation to domestic policy. However, the conduct of the war was still carried out under the leadership of Churchill. This meant that the imperialist character of the foreign policy of the British government had not been undermined and changed in genuine terms. Indeed, the government indicated its imperialist intentions by its emphasis on defence of the role of the British empire by its concentration of military engagements with Germany in Egypt. The influence of the people was indicated by the publication of the Beveridge report which promised the introduction of the welfare state. If the Labour members of the Cabinet has been principled, they would have argued in favour of the introduction of the Beveridge report in immediate terms. Indeed, this is what the Trotskyists should have demanded. In other words, this type of approach would have been part of a policy to develop a genuine peoples war against fascism. The myth of the leadership of Churchill should have been challenged and instead it would have been necessity to strive to create an authentic people’s government in order to conduct an authentic form of struggle against fascism. This perspective would have been connected to the aim of ending the policy of the postponement of elections and instead developed support for elections to be held in order to create a people’s government. But there was no consistent and effective agitation in favour of this approach. Instead of developing effective political perspectives, the Trotskyists concentrated on supporting various industrial disputes in order to increase their influence within society. In other words, they became a party of protest rather than the expression of a coherent strategy of change in the circumstances of the world war. Furthermore, the role of the Soviet Union in the anti-fascist struggle led to the increasing credibility of the Communist party within the British working class. In other words, there was not apparently any alternative to the influence of the support for the conduct of the war under the auspices of the role of the British government. This situation was apparently accepted by the Trotskyists in terms of their effective defensive stance of primarily expressing solidarity the various industrial disputes that arose. But the aim that should have been promoted was for the formation of a genuine workers government in order to carry out a genuine form of anti-fascist war. The primary objective should have been to replace the role of the imperialist character of the war being conducted by the British government with a different form of war based on the principles of democracy and genuine struggle to end the role of fascism. But the dogmatic rigidities of revolutionary defeatism meant that this approach was not adopted by the Trotskyist organisations. Instead, they became a party of protest and organised in various bye elections in order to obtain votes in favour of the expression of the discontent of the people. This development was actually an expression of a lack of a credible perspective for the realisation of a revolutionary war against fascism.

In relation to the attitude to be adopted concerning the role of the Soviet Union in the second world war the issues were very complex. On the regime was an expression of the authoritarian domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy, but Trotsky insisted that because of the nationalised property relations it was a degenerated workers state. Therefore, it would be necessary to defend these gains in connection to the development of war with fascist Germany. However, there was controversy within the Trotskyist movement on this issue and an oppositional group developed which effectively refused to defend the USSR in the second world war because of its bureaucratic character and instead adopted a defeatist standpoint of a rejection of support for any of the countries in the conflict. Bambery should consistently be a supporter of this latter stance because of his affiliation with the state capitalist position concerning the character of the USSR, but his empirical description of events raises issues that seem to challenge the validity of the defeatist approach. Indeed, his initial comments seem to question the defeatist standpoint: “A German attack on Russia was only a matter of time. Victory there was key to Hitler’s vision of the Third Reich and to the eventual global domination he craved. Domination of Europe would be followed by a showdown with the United States.” (p115) Thus in order to defeat the aims of the German dictator it would be necessary to support the necessarily defensive struggle of the Soviet people to oppose the possible invasion of their country. In order to defeat the attempt to dominate their country by the fascist army it would be necessary to critically support the military opposition of the Red army. In this context the approach of defeatism would be a dogmatic abstraction that was not equal to the challenges of the situation. In other words, the victory of the Red army would be preferable to the horrors that would be perpetuated, and indeed were expressed in the areas invaded by the German army. Therefore, a struggle of national liberation would essentially occur to ensure that the domination of a fascist power was not established and consolidated. It is true that problems would be created by the fact that this struggle had to occur under the leadership of the Stalinist forces. Therefore, it was necessary in this situation to apply the politics of the lesser evil, or to accept that the adoption of an approach that would not directly and immediately be connected to the necessity to defend the USSR under these difficult circumstances would be preferable to the consolidation of the domination of the invading force of the German army. Indeed, the victory of the Red army under these complex conditions would possibly also create the basis to generate the prospect of the overcoming of the domination of Stalinism.

Bambery’s description of the situation created by the German invasion and repressive occupation of the USSR by the German army seems to indicate an expression of support for the attempts of the Red army to oppose these developments: “Stalin was fighting a war of national defence on home territory. Despite his own incompetence and that of the state bureaucracy, the Red army fought ferociously because it was aware of the savagery the Nazis were inflicting in the occupied areas.” (p125) This comment seems to imply that despite the authoritarian character of Stalinism it was still necessary and principled to support the effectively defensive struggle of the Soviet people to oppose the invasion and domination of their society by the forces of the German army. The victory of the Germans would result in the imposition of a regime of slavery that would actually be more repressive than the authoritarian character of the social formation dominated by the Stalinists. Bambery essentially indicates the differences when he comments that: “There were two different dynamics at work. Hitler was fighting an imperialist war that was also a genocidal one. Stalin was fighting a war based on nationalism.” (p126) But this comment implies that what was the important issue was a struggle for genuine national defence against the expansionist and repressive character of the invasion of the USSR by the German army. Bambery also outlines in a sensitive manner the extent of the terrible repression that was generated under the Nazi regime and so this analysis also suggests the necessity for critical support of the role of the Red army in the struggle against the German army. However, he does not directly make this point. Instead, his description of the repressive character of the German regime would seem to imply that critical support should be given to the military struggle of the red army to end the domination of their country by the forces of a terrible authoritarian regime.

However, we also have to criticise the perspectives of the American Socialist Workers party which essentially became cheerleaders for the role of the Soviet Red army. The point is that support for the defence of the USSR under the circumstances of invasion by a reactionary imperialist power should not mean that the aim of solidarity becomes a justification to deny the continued necessity of critical analysis. The point is that the role of the Red Army should be subject to the approach of constant evaluation of its actions. For example, we can criticise the failure of the Red army to militarily support the uprising of the people of Warsaw against the German occupation. It was also necessary to demand the withdrawal of the Red army from Eastern Europe after the German army had been defeated. Also, an independent progressive regime should have been created in Germany after the defeat of fascism, and the occupation of Germany by the Allied forces should have had a temporary character. However what attitude should principled revolutionaries adopt towards the aspect of the military struggle waged by the capitalist powers of the USA and UK? Bambery implies that they were important in the defeat of fascism, but he expresses no political opinion connected to this observation. But he emphasises that the most important aspect for the defeat of the German army was the role of the Soviet Red army: “Russian casualties in the Second World War were twenty times greater than those of the US and Britain combined. The simple fact was that the war against Nazi Germany was won by Russia.” (p163) However it could obviously be suggested that the military role of the USA and UK was also essential to the defeat of the German army. Therefore, what attitude should be adopted towards the conflict. Could it be defined in terms of the revolutionary defeatism that was the basis of the political approach of the principled Marxists during world war one? On the one hand it was necessary and principled to support the defence of the Soviet Union without adopting an uncritical attitude. Not all of the actions of the Red army could be justified. On the other hand, the armies of the USA and UK were also apparently involved in the defeat of the German army. In this context what did this development mean in terms of the perspective of revolutionary defeatism and the stance that it was not principled to support a capitalist power in a military situation? The Fourth International continue to formally adopt the position of revolutionary defeatism in an unconvincing manner because in actuality they tended to ignore its necessity, and instead outlined the vague notion of the view that the formation of a worker’s government would be the basis to conduct a genuinely popular war against the fascist powers. Hence, they ignored the importance of the aim of revolutionary defeatism because of its apparently lack of relevance for understanding the military and political character of the second world war. But there was another principled option, which was to suggest that the development of democratic control of the armies of the Allied power, such as the election of the officers by the soldiers, would enable the development of a genuine popular struggle against the fascist powers. Until this possibility was realised it would be necessary to continue to emphasise that the major aim of the Allied powers was not the defeat over fascism but instead the defeat of a major imperialist rival. However, it was not possible to translate this criticism into forms of active opposition to the aims of the democratic imperialist powers. Instead, the Marxists and the workers had to accept the present situation and to essentially promote their aims in propagandist terms. Therefore, they would not attempt to actively oppose the objectives of the bourgeois democratic countries in the form of an attempt to realise the approach of revolutionary defeatism in practical terms. Indeed, this is what actually happened. Therefore, the Trotskyists concentrated on supporting the strikes of workers that occurred in this period. In other words, revolutionary defeatism under the circumstances did become a formality and so it was necessary to advocate this approach in propagandist terms. The emphasis of propaganda of the revolutionary Marxists would be that the major bourgeois democratic imperialist powers were not interested in opposing a fascist imperialist power. Instead, only the increased influence of the workers and rank and file soldiers could achieve this objective. This point was confirmed by the establishment of a regime in Western Germany which was based on the influence of what had been the former fascist state apparatus. Only the promotion of international proletarian revolution could definitively defeat the influence of fascism and instead establish genuinely popular and democratic regimes. In this context, as Bambery points out, it was the popular struggle of the people of Europe that resulted in the effective defeat of fascism in Europe.

The events involved in the development of popular resistance movements in countries like Italy, France, Greece and Yugoslavia, are described by Bambery. He concludes: “The Resistance movements throughout Europe, largely led by the Communists and peopled by the working class and peasants, were fighting a real anti-fascist war. It had revolutionary potential which surfaced only to be thrust back by the Communists in line with Stalin’s wishes. All three Allies either used the Resistance to their own ends or actively crushed it. They key to ensuring that the revolutionary potential of the Resistance did not come to fruition lay with the leadership of the Communist parties, who limited their goal to achieving at best, parliamentary democracy. The one leader who did not succumb to Stalin’s wishes was Tito, because he had his own nationalist project and the mass support he built allowed him to realise it.” (p192) But we could also suggest that the popular and progressive character of developments in Yugoslavia meant that a form of a genuine democratic revolution occurred which did create a genuine degenerated workers’ state. In a limited manner the leadership of the Yugoslav Communist party did act to promote the realisation of limited forms of economic and political democracy which expressed the possibility for the workers and peasants to have an influence over the character of the government that was formed. But generally, in the other countries where the resistance movements were strong the influence of the communist parties was utilised in order to restore bourgeois democracy, except for Greece where civil war occurred. In other words, the potential to connect the development of a process of democratic revolution to the possibility for proletarian revolution was not realised because of the role of the communist parties because of the influence of Stalin with regards to their political actions. Some left-wing organisations did emerge in these situations which had more radical objectives, but they could not become sufficiently popular or effective in order to transform these situations into becoming an expression of the possibility for socialist revolution. Instead, the result was the stabilisation of capitalism in terms of the importance of the accommodating role of Stalinism.

Bambery concludes that: “The second world war was not, in the minds of those who ruled the Allied powers a war against fascism. Nor was it a war for democracy.” (p239) Therefore: “The central argument of this book is that the second world war was an imperialist war but that fascism ensured it took place in an entirely different ideological environment than did the 1914-18 conflict. Across the world millions of people yearned for the destruction of fascism and were prepared to back their countries leaders if they could achieve that.” (p239) Bambery accepts that an aspect of the situation became defined by the role of the popular resistance movements in opposing fascism but that this aspect did not negate the general inter-imperialist character of the second world war. He also outlines how the stabilisation of capitalism was made possible in Western Europe because of the general reactionary role of the Communist parties in ensuring the stabilisation of capitalism despite the emergence of pre-revolutionary situations in countries like Italy and France. But what he does not seem to address is whether it could be possible to have transformed the popular anti-fascist sentiment of the people into the development of a genuine progressive type of war against fascism. Could it have been possible for the people of countries like the UK to have developed the political capacity to transform the imperialist objectives of the British government into a more principled and democratic aspiration to create a genuine type of popular war with German fascism. This is an issue that is addressed more directly in the book by Donny Gluckstein: ‘A Peoples History of the Second World War: Resistance versus Empire’ (Pluto Press 2012)

The starting point of Gluckstein is that there was an inter-imperialist war and a genuine peoples war that were the two contradictory aspects of the second world war. He also indicates that the issue as to whether the second world war can be defined in imperialist terms or is instead an expression of the popular struggle of the people can be complicated but he comments: “So one essential aspect of the Second World War was that millions upon millions were inspired to resist or fight against fascist genocide, tyranny and oppression and did not come to feel they were duped into this belief.”(p3) He indicates the repressive character of the role of the fascist powers and so the logical conclusion is that opposition to this attempt to impose the domination of fascism over Europe and Asia was necessarily opposed by the role of the people who ensured that what resulted was a type of popular struggle to reject the attempt to establish a system of the authoritarian domination of society. But he rejects the apparent logical justification of the role of a genuine people’s war against fascism and instead suggests in an ambiguous manner that there were two types of war that were being conducted against the fascist powers: “It is the argument of this book that the gulf between the motivation of Allied governments and those who fought against brutality, oppression and dictatorship could not be bridged. Therefore, the world shattering events of the 1939 to 1945 period did not constitute a single combat against the Axis powers, but amounted to two distinct wars.” (p5) But the problem with this indecisive perspective is that the issue of what type of war was dominant could be evaded with this uncertain and ambiguous approach. The point is that primary role of the bourgeois democratic imperialist powers in the process of opposition to the aims of the fascist powers meant that the aspect of the people’s war would be a secondary and often repressed aspect of the objectives of these states. This is not to deny the importance of the aspect of the people’s war, but we have to establish its precise relationship to what is the dominant aspect of the role of the inter-imperialist character of the military and political conflict. Instead Gluckstein suggests in an ambiguous manner that: “In the case of the Second World War political relations between states generated war between the Axis and Allied power blocks; but political relations between people and governments produced another war fought by the former for their own ends – this phenomenon being particularly evident in resistance movements which operated beyond the control of formal governments.”(p6) But the problem with this view is the aspect of ambiguity which could possibly suggest that the various popular resistance movements had revolutionary objectives. In actuality their aims were often limited by the role of the Stalinist leadership of the popular organisations of struggle and so this meant that they generally accepted the aims of the Allied powers. Therefore, a popular type of war did not realise its possible potential and often accepted the objective for the defeat of the Axis powers in non-revolutionary terms. Thus, the aspect of a people’s struggle was generally limited to what was acceptable in relation to the attempt of the Allies to defeat fascism without any necessary development of a popular process of the transformation of society. Therefore, if despite these limitations the aspect of a people’s struggle became the dominant aspect of the process of opposition to fascist domination, as in Yugoslavia and Greece, this development was not supported by the Allied governments. In Italy and France any potential for the transformation of popular anti-fascist struggle becoming a revolutionary struggle for the realisation of the political power of the working class was undermined and opposed by the important role of the various Communist parties. Therefore, the aspect of people’s struggle has to be qualified by the aspect of the problematical role of Stalinism. It could be argued that the opportunist aspect of Stalinism meant that the aspect of a people’s war was often limited in relation to its potential for being able to translate opposition to fascism into becoming the expression of the generation of progressive change within society. In other words, it has to be suggested that the transformation of the dynamics of the people’s war into becoming a process of revolutionary change was generally not realised. Hence the objectives of the bourgeois democratic powers and the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union essentially were able to establish the character of the second world war and to oppose the realisation of the potential for the success of the people’s war. But this development does not mean that the aspect of the people’s war was essentially of a formal character. Instead, the general uprising of the people of Europe against fascist domination and occupation had an important role in the process of the development of opposition to the aims of German imperialism. It could be argued that the very possibility of the victory of the Allied powers would have been more difficult without this development of a people’s war against fascism. But does this apparent connection of the people’s war mean that it would have been principled for revolutionary Marxists to support the objectives of the Allied military struggle? The answer to this question cannot be given an unconditional justification because the Allies were not aiming to oppose fascism and instead were concerned with the rejection of the imperialist ambitions of the Axis powers. In this context the importance of this aspect of inter-imperialist rivalry for defining the character of the second world war meant that the aspect of the people’s war could not become a more important aspect that would be able to define the character of the conflict. Instead, the peoples war was an unofficial and subordinate aspect that could not replace the primary importance of the military character of the antagonism between the major imperialist powers. However, the role of the Soviet Red Army had a limited progressive aspect because its role represented a genuine action of national defence against the invasion of the USSR by the German armed forces. In this context if Britain had been invaded the issue of national defence would no longer have been an expression of imperialist interests and instead would have expressed how to oppose the development of occupation by a reactionary fascist power. It is interesting that in relation to France the national ruling class essentially accepted the occupation of the country by the fascist power of Germany and so created a government of national collaboration. Therefore, the issue of national defence essentially took the form of struggle of resistance groups with working class and Communist party participation. In this context the imperialist character of France had been temporarily ended by fascist occupation and instead national liberation became a genuine and principled demand. Gluckstein rightly comments that the actions of the Stalinists were ultimately to subordinate the activity of the resistance struggle of the people’s war to the pro-capitalist and imperialist aims of the French bourgeoisie. This development indicates that there was no necessary dynamic between the development of a people’s war and the possibility of revolutionary change. This prospect would require the role of a genuine revolutionary party which was generally not achieved, except in the limited instance of the situation in Yugoslavia where the Communists acted to transform the role of national liberation into the process of the creation of a degenerated workers state. But this development was made possible because the Communist party managed to effectively reject the domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR. In most situations the aspect of a people’s war did not spontaneously resolve the problem of the lack of a genuine and principled form of revolutionary leadership of a genuine Marxist party. This meant that the spontaneous character of the mass struggles against fascism could not in and of themselves resolve the issue of the reactionary role of the forces of Stalinism. But this limitation does not mean that the concept of a people’s war is essentially problematical. Instead, it has contradictory aspects because of the reactionary role of Stalinism.

Gluckstein mentions one important objection to the concept of the peoples war: “One possible objection to the concept of the second world war involving a peoples war might be that, in propaganda terms, all modern imperialist wars are presented as ‘progressive and ‘democratic’.” (p21) This criticism may be valid if there was not the development of what could be considered to be peoples wars. It was the actual opposition of the role of the people in a number of countries that indicated that the situation could not be characterised merely as an inter-imperialist war. The point is that it was the very reactionary character of the domination of Europe by the fascist powers that generated the development of what were authentically forms of popular struggle against this development. Gluckstein indicates how the situation in Yugoslavia corresponded with this perspective. He outlines how the communist movement led by Tito became a popular expression of the military struggle against fascism. But what is not indicated is how the success of this aspect enabled the Yugoslav partisans to be essentially independent from the domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR and so they rejected the perspective of the necessity to establish a regime that was based on the realisation of the defence of capitalism. Instead, the successful character of the anti-fascist struggle became the basis to establish a government that had the objective of ending the domination of capitalism. It could be suggested that the government of the Yugoslav partisans had a popular character and was responsive to the aspirations of the people for social progress and equality. The result of this aspect was action to end the domination of capital and the realisation of a process of the nationalisation of the economy in which the influence of the role of the workers was an important aspect of this development. However, the ideology of Stalinism meant that the communist party did not directly express the interests of the people and instead it still ruled the society in elitist terms. Hence it could be argued that whilst aspects of a popular proletarian revolution were realised this was not on the basis of the role of a genuine type of participatory democracy. Instead, the workers, whilst increasing their influence in the organisation of the economy, were still subordinated to the continuing elitist role of the communist party. Therefore, the success of the anti-fascist struggle, or the effective realisation of the popular role of a people’s war, did not consistently create a situation of the genuine accountability of the party to the aspirations of the people. Instead in an elitist manner the party acted to achieve the aims of the people in limited terms. But despite these problems the Yugoslav Communist party was not an appendage of the Soviet bureaucracy and so this aspect was a contrast with what occurred in the rest of Eastern Europe. In most of Eastern Europe the domination of fascist type regimes was ended by the military success of the Soviet Red army and this meant that fascism was overthrow in these external terms. This resulted in the formation of regimes that were subordinated to the domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR. But in Yugoslavia the process of the overthrow of fascism was more the result of the success of an internal people’s war and so the regime that was created had a limited accountability to the aspirations of the workers. This meant a type of participatory democracy was established in limited terms. The differences with traditional Stalinism were indicated by the increasing development of the opposition of Stalin to the Tito regime in Yugoslavia. However, the influence of a popular form of nationalism meant that this situation did not result in the expression of a consistent form of revolutionary Marxism by the Yugoslav Communist party. Nevertheless, the split with the Soviet bureaucracy was an indication that a different type of society had been formed when contrasted to the regimes of the new Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe. In limited terms it could be argued that a type of degenerated workers state had been established that in some sense was accountable to the interests of the working class. This resulted in forms of workers control in the organisation of the economy. But Gluckstein’s dogmatic perspective of state capitalism means that he cannot acknowledge the importance of the changes that occurred. Instead, he ambiguously comments that: “The fact that Tito was not dependent on a single imperialist power, but could balance them off against each other, proved significant in the long run combined with the success of a massive and dogged people’s war, that provided the basis for a genuinely independent state after 1945” (p37) But what characterised this independence? It was because the leadership of the Yugoslav Communist party did in a limited manner act to realise the interests of the workers and peasants. This aspect was not realised in a consistent and principled manner, and so it could not be suggested that a genuine type of workers state was established. But within these limitations a type of deformed proletarian revolution had occurred, and the result was a limited involvement of the workers in the management and organisation of the economy. This event was the greatest success of the international working class since the Russian revolution.

Gluckstein also outlines the aspect of the liberation struggle in Greece. The military role of the British government acted to ensure that the success of the communist led EAM/ELAS resistance movement did not result in the formation of a left-wing government. The result of this development was a civil war between the reactionary and progressive forces that eventually led to the triumph of an administration that was based on American support. Therefore, this situation was another indication that the dynamics of popular resistance movements was to challenge the domination of bourgeois governments which had been based on accommodation to the development of fascist control during world war two. The lack of support of the Soviet government ensured the ultimate failure of the popular liberation movement to establish a durable alternative form of regime. However, this development was another indication that the character of the anti-fascist struggle if it had a genuine popular character would inevitably become an expression of opposition to the continued domination of capitalism. This point was understood by Churchill who preferred to support the very collaborators with fascism rather than contemplate the realisation of the success of some form of revolutionary change. It is possible that if the liberation movement had been successful a type of change could have occurred which would have been similar to that which occurred in Yugoslavia.

Gluckstein outlines the events of the Warsaw uprising and indicates the failure of the Soviet red army to assist this struggle. This development was an indication that Stalin was essentially opposed to any expression of the popular role of the people because it could develop the possibility to establish a genuine form of worker’s state. In other words, the uprising of the people had a dynamic that was connected to the possibility of genuine revolutionary change that could result in the formation of a type of society that had the possibility to become a type of socialism. This point was understood by Stalin which was why he was deliberately indifferent about the possibility of the success of the Warsaw uprising. Instead, his ultimate aim was to invade Poland as the only basis to defeat the German imperialists and in this manner establish a puppet regime that would become part of the Soviet empire. One of his major concerns was to oppose any attempt to develop a revolutionary type of society close to the USSR, because this could result in increasing discontent within the Soviet Union. It has been suggested that the major aims of the Polish resistance movement were nationalist and so was not interested in socialism. But there was a left-wing mood within the Polish people which could have become the basis to establish a genuine type of workers government. Stalin was aware of these possibilities and so he accepted the role of the German repression of the Warsaw uprising. This development was an indication that the USSR was not a degenerated workers state, because even that type of social formation would have expressed the motivation to provide support for the uprising of the Polish workers. Instead, the counterrevolutionary character of the Soviet bureaucracy meant that its nationalist objectives were connected to opposing any attempt to establish a genuine worker state. Therefore, the aspect of the defence of the nationalised economy of the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy was not an indication of the actuality of a type of degenerated worker’s state. Instead, there was a reactionary social formation and its ruling class had imperialist objectives and in this manner were indifferent to the situation of the Polish workers. Hence the indifference of Stalin concerning the Warsaw uprising was an expression of the very fact that it was not credible to continue to insist like Trotsky that the USSR was any type of degenerated worker’s state. Instead, Stalin had imperialist ambitions to dominate Eastern Europe and the formation of a popular regime in Poland following the success of an uprising against German imperialist forces could only undermine the realisation of these objectives. Therefore, the unprincipled opportunism of Stalin had a logical basis in that he could not contemplate the formation of a genuine revolutionary regime close to the borders of the USSR. Instead, it was preferable to allow the German army to suppress the Warsaw uprising rather than allow the possible creation of a revolutionary regime that would ultimately challenge the role of the bureaucratic elite of the USSR. This development indicated that the necessity of the progress of the people In Europe should create a situation in which the opportunism of the role of Stalinism could be challenged by the development of an international form of popular struggle against fascism, but this did not occur because the expansion of the Red army meant that the process of the end of the domination of fascism was achieved in bureaucratic terms. At the level of the opposition of fascism and Stalinism the forces of the Red army should still be critically supported but it still had to be emphasised that only the effective expression of the independent role of the working class in each individual country could advance the possibility of the liberation of the people and so establish a genuinely democratic and potentially socialist type of society.

The position of the Fourth International in relation to the general issue of developing a political position in regard to the second world war was to support Trotsky’s advocacy of revolutionary defeatism in terms of the conflict between the rival imperialist powers. However, this issue was complicated by the fact that unlike the first world war the actual issue became that of the possibility of invasion by German imperialism of France and then Britain. Therefore, the issue of national defence became an issue that the workers had to tackle if they were to try and oppose fascist imperialist occupation of their given countries. In other words, national defence was no longer about supporting of a bourgeois government but instead of conducting forms of popular opposition to the fascist occupation and domination of what had initially been an imperialist country such as France. Indeed, sections of the French ruling class collaborated with the Nazi regime and so the process of opposition to this development acquired authentically popular and anti-fascist aspects. In this context the approach of revolutionary defeatism was shown to have become outdated because of this development of the invasion of an imperialist country such as France by a rival imperialist power. Instead, the issue was no longer about national defence but instead the combination of the aspects of national liberation with the struggle for progressive change that would raise the possibility of the socialist transformation of society. Bambery outlines the circumstances of the tensions between the differing objectives of DE Gaulle and the popular resistance movement in France. But ultimately the opportunist character of the Communist party meant that the resistance struggle accepted the aims of DE Gaulle for the replacement of the domination of the fascist occupation with the establishment of a bourgeois democratic type regime. However, this situation indicated that there were possibilities to transform the struggle against fascist domination of France into the basis of a popular struggle for a type of revolutionary change. But the opportunist limitations of the Stalinist leadership of the resistance movement undermined the development and realisation of this possibility. Unfortunately, the small Trotskyist forces were never able to become influential in the resistance movement in order to be able to promote in an effective manner the necessity of the connection between the anti-fascist struggle with the importance of genuine revolutionary objectives. Instead, Stalinist domination of the resistance struggle meant that the objectives of the popular struggle was limited to the objective of ending the domination of German imperialism in France. Nevertheless, despite these limitations it could still be suggested that a genuine struggle for the possibility of national liberation had become necessary. In the period 1940-45 France was no longer an effective imperialist power but was instead subordinated to the domination of German imperialism. Therefore, a genuine process of the struggle for national liberation was possible and necessary. But in order that this possibility genuinely corresponded to the interests of the working class it was necessary to connect the issue of national liberation to the aim of socialist revolutionary change. Instead, the leadership of the resistance movement rejected these aims and instead aspired to restore the previous imperialist character of France. Therefore, an opportunist aspect of the resistance struggle undermined its possible development in the most principled manner. Instead, the struggle was dominated by the opportunist objectives of the role of Stalinism and the acceptance of the role of the restoration of bourgeois democracy. But despite these limitations it could still be suggested that generally a progressive struggle for national liberation from imperialist domination did occur.

In relation to Britain the situation seems to be very complex. On the one hand the government was effectively conducting the war in terms of the interests of British capitalism and imperialism. On the other hand, the people whilst supporting the war also aspired to improve their situation and to realise the objectives of the creation of a more democratic and egalitarian society. Therefore, what was indicated was a subordinated aspect of a people’s war as part of the aspects of the situation. This resulted, as Bambery outlines, in the development of many strikes by workers for increased wages and better economic conditions and the soldiers attempted to realise the possibility of democracy in the organisation of the army. But he does not establish how this popular discontent could have resulted in the development of a genuine people’s war against fascist imperialism. The point is that it would have been necessary to struggle to replace the Churchill collation government with a genuine people’s government of the Labour party and trade unions which would be committed to liberation of the colonies and social reforms. Indeed, the popularity of the Beveridge report about the necessity to create the welfare state indicated the increasing level of support for the formation of a people’s government that would introduce social reforms and also develop a genuinely democratic type of society. Therefore, the slogan should have been for the formation of a people’s government in order to carry out a genuine anti-fascist war. However, this perspective was not promoted by the various Trotskyist organisations who essentially concentrated on emphasising the aim of the struggling for the economic improvements of the workers. But this meant that they essentially considered that revolutionary defeatism was a problematical approach under the given circumstances. In other words, they did not effectively oppose the military struggle of the bourgeois democratic imperialist power of Britain against the fascist imperialism of Germany. However, this apparent limitation could have been overcome by the slogan of change the inter-imperialist war into a people’s war. This approach would have recognised that the people of the UK wanted to conduct a genuine people’s war and were not concerned with Churchill’s major concern of defence of the empire. It was only the support of the Labour party that sustained the coalition and enabled Churchill to realise his policy objectives in relation to the war. Thus, the demand should have been for the Labour party to end the coalition and instead form a people’s government in order to conduct a genuine anti-fascist struggle.

What is the relationship of this perspective to revolutionary defeatism? The important point has to be made that the situation is not identical to the first world war when rival imperialist powers of a similar character were in struggle. Instead, the issue is complicated by the aspect of fascism versus regimes of bourgeois democracy. Thus, the original aim of the transformation of inter-imperialist war into a civil war is no longer applicable. Instead, it is about how the inter-imperialist conflict can become transformed into a genuine and effective struggle against fascist imperialism. In this context revolutionary defeatism would essentially be replaced by the aim of ending the imperialist character of the objectives of the coalition government of the UK and instead aspiring to realise the aspects of the possibility for a genuinely progressive objectives in relation to the conflict. Or to suggest that the imperialist conflict should become transformed into a people’s war against fascism. This possibility could not be realised without the development of the replacement of the coalition government with a principled people’s government that would be committed to radical change and the realisation of workers management of the economy. However, without this development did this mean that the workers should oppose what is still an inter-imperialist conflict? The problem with the perspective of revolutionary defeatism is that the issue has become complicated by the aspect of the fascist character of German imperialism. Hence the emphasis should become on the realisation of democratic control of the army in order to initiate the development of an effective people’s war against fascism. But this means that in its essential terms the approach of revolutionary defeatism is no longer being either advocated or effectively practiced in the bourgeois democratic countries. However, this stance does not mean undermining the importance of the independent role of the working class which is crucial if a progressive type of struggle with German imperialism is to be consistently realised. This modified stance does not mean political support for the aims of British and American imperialism, but it does mean that opposition to the war has been essentially replaced by the major objective of the necessity for a people’s war.

Bambery concludes with the comment: “To the question ‘Was the Second World War’ an imperialist war or a peoples war? the answer is that ‘it was both’. However, it does not follow that the balance between the two was the same everywhere. Variations were partly due to subjective factors such as the communists.” (p212) But the issue is when did it become possible to support the war because its character had become changed? The approach of Bambery is ambiguous he comments: “In the homelands of the Allied powers it was sometimes hard to spot the differences between those fighting fascism and those upholding Empires…..In Britain the results of the 1945 general election confirmed that the population and ruling class had been fighting separate, parallel wars.” (p213) But the point is what attitude should be adopted about this complex situation? In the occupied countries it was quite obvious about providing critical support for popular and progressive struggles against reactionary imperialist domination. But in the Allied countries the aims of the governments were connected to facilitating the consolidation of colonial forms of domination. Indeed, this was the character of the war that was carried out between the Allies and Japan. Therefore, it was necessary to challenge the continuing imperialist character of the war by the development of the influence of the role of the people so that the objectives of the military struggle became transformed into being more progressive. However, the aspect of the opposition of fascist imperialism and bourgeois democratic imperialism meant that the situation was more complex than that which occurred during world war one. In this context the approach of revolutionary defeatism had to be seriously modified and replaced with a perspective of the transformation of the imperialist military struggle into a people’s war. The aim of the defeat of fascist imperialism had to be connected to the development of the increased influence of the role of the working class. This was the effective approach of the principled revolutionary Marxists of the Trotskyists.