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Book review

Fraternising With the Enemy

- Reviews section -

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The Second World War remains a matter of controversy. Two recent books - Donny Gluckstein's *A People's History of the Second World War* (Pluto, 2012) and James Heartfield's *An Unpatriotic History of the Second World War* (Zero, 2012) - have argued powerfully that the war was a struggle between empires rather than a crusade against fascism. But what these books failed to give was any account of those who held such a position at the time, and how they put their theory into practice.

Yvan Craipeau's book makes available to English readers for the first time the story of revolutionary socialists in occupied France, and cuts across many of the conventional myths of the Resistance. Translator David Broder has added some useful historical notes, and in an appendix has translated all six surviving issues of *Arbeiter und Soldat* (Worker and Soldier - the German-language paper produced by the French Trotskyists). Craipeau, who died aged 90 in 2001, was a veteran Trotskyist and socialist activist. He was an active participant in the events he describes, though his book is based on research, not personal recollection.

Compared with the mainstream Resistance, in which the French Communist Party (PCF) played a leading role, the Trotskyists were a small and marginal group. They numbered only a few hundred, and it would be easy to mock them as insignificant. But the Gestapo took them seriously enough. At least a hundred were arrested. Craipeau notes that 'many dozens' died, mainly after being deported to concentration camps; at least two, David Rousset and Jean-René Chauvin, survived German camps and later wrote movingly of their experiences. Craipeau himself narrowly escaped the Gestapo by hitting one of them on the chin with the Complete Works of Oscar Wilde.

The organisational divisions among the French Trotskyists will be of interest only to aficionados, but the substance of their disagreements is of more general interest: how did resistance to national oppression relate to the struggle for socialism; what alliances were most effective in defeating fascism? The Trotskyists hoped that the Second World War, like the First, might end with a revolutionary upheaval; German defeat could lead to a workers' rising. Hence for them 'the task was not to demoralise the German workers but rather to make them conscious of their strength.' They saw the German working class as the victims of Nazism, and recalled frequently in their propaganda that only 20 years earlier Germany had seemed to be on the brink of socialist revolution.

For the PCF, the occupying German soldiers were seen simply as a manifestation of fascism, hence the notorious slogan 'chacun son boche' (rendered by Broder as 'everyone kill a Kraut'). To the Trotskyists, however, they were potential allies - workers (often unwillingly) in uniform.

Despite their limited numbers the achievements of the Trotskyists were quite remarkable. They produced and distributed clandestinely a number of publications presenting an internationalist analysis of the war. And they succeeded in making contact with German soldiers, setting up meetings and distributing German-language propaganda. Obviously the German authorities would not tolerate this. Seventeen German soldiers were shot in Brest, and key Trotskyist activists like Robert Cruau and Paul Widelin (also known as Martin Monat) were killed.

The most remarkable aspect of this book is the extensive quotation from the clandestine Trotskyist press. This tells some stories often absent from conventional histories of the war. *Arbeiter und Soldat* published letters from German soldiers, showing that class consciousness had not been obliterated. As one put it: 'I have lost everything ... so that these capitalist bastards can have a better life and bask in their own grease.' There were several mutinies by German troops on French soil. At Palinges in eastern France the population fraternised with German soldiers who had been jailed for indiscipline.

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There are reports too of various strikes by French workers under the German occupation – the grip of the occupiers was never total. A Trotskyist worker played a leading role in a successful strike in Northern Paris against the withdrawal of a bonus. In 1942 railway workers and engineers struck and demonstrated in the streets and thus prevented deportations to forced labour in Germany.

In Marseille in May 1944 – two weeks before the Normandy landings – there was a general strike against a cut in the bread ration. This mass action was suppressed not by the German forces, who were already beginning to envisage defeat, but by heavy bombing by the US air force which killed nearly 2,000 people and put an end to the action. The Trotskyists were also firmly anti-imperialist. They were particularly concerned with the plight of Indochinese workers brought to France at the outbreak of war, and later made to do excavation work on starvation wages. The Trotskyists developed contacts with them and supported their strikes.

At the so-called ‘Liberation’ France got a government under General de Gaulle (and backed up by the PCF) which was committed to defending and preserving France’s empire. As a result, France became enmeshed in two long and savage colonial wars, in Indochina and Algeria, and did not know peace until 1962. While Craipeau recognises that the Trotskyists sometime erred on the side of over-optimism, they had the great merit of offering an alternative to this débâcle, and they deserve to be remembered.

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