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Second World War resistance

“Martin Monath: A Jewish Resistance Fighter Among Nazi Soldiers”

- Reviews section -

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“Martin Monath: A Jewish Resistance Fighter Among Nazi Soldiers” – by Nathaniel Flakin, Pluto Press 2019.

Most people in the revolutionary socialist movement who have an interest in its activities during the Second World War will have heard of the group in France who published a paper *Arbeiter und Soldat* (worker and soldier) aimed at rank and file soldiers in the occupying German army. Now, for the first time, as complete a biography as possible of Martin Monath (1913-44) – the main organiser of this courageous action – has been published. Despite the fact that these events had negligible impact on the course of the war and occurred over 75 years ago, they still hold important lessons for all internationalists, as this review will hopefully show.

Early Years in Berlin

Nathaniel Flakin’s first task in reconstructing the early years of Martin Monath was to work out the correct spelling of his surname. In the scrappy accounts of his activities in WWII, Monath is referred to variously as “Viktor”, “Paul Widelin”, “Monat” and various other names. Having established the correct spelling, Flakin was able to access documents from German archives and contact the descendants of Monath’s brother and sister in Israel, who possess some of his correspondence.

Martin Monath was born in 1913 in Berlin into a Jewish family of Galician (Austro-Hungarian, then Ukrainian) origin. His father ran a men’s clothes shop, precarious during hard economic times, and his mother and first stepmother died in quick succession. His second stepmother was very oppressive, so it can be concluded that Martin had a difficult childhood. He joined the socialist-Zionist organisation Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard) before the Nazis came to power.

Flakin illustrates how this organisation was tolerated for a while by the Nazi regime and tells us that Monath addressed one of their meetings, outlining the ideas of Karl Marx. He also spent a year around 1934 attending a Hashomer Hatzair agricultural training programme in Denmark, in preparation for emigration to a kibbutz in Israel, something he decided not to do. Monath was in contact with friends who had emigrated and recoiled from the racist practices of the Zionists, either leaving or being expelled from the kibbutz and subsequently embracing Trotskyism. This correspondence is likely to have initiated Monath’s break with Zionism.

Belgium

In May 1939, Monath decided to move to Brussels, intending later to go and study engineering in Paris. Flakin discusses the development of his political views at this time, as expressed in his correspondence with his brother in Israel and he was clearly moving closer to Trotskyism. He thus expresses the view that the aim of the Soviet Union under Stalin at that time – of campaigning for an alliance with the bourgeois democratic imperialist countries against Nazi Germany – left out of the equation that these states were implacably hostile to the gains of the October revolution. The Stalinists’ failed strategy led not only to the betrayal of the Spanish revolution of 1936-39 but also the disastrous Hitler-Stalin Pact, as the regime sought an – at least temporary – alliance in the face of the bourgeois democracies’ appeasement of the Nazi regime. Within a week of the Hitler-Stalin Pact the Nazis invaded Poland, prompting a British declaration of war, followed two weeks later by the Soviet Union occupying the eastern portion of

Poland under the terms of the Pact.

Monath’s activities in the year following his move to Brussels are obscure. After the outbreak of war in the east, the Belgian section of the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI) collapsed, partly – according to the Ernest Mandel’s biographer – as a result of its best-known leader Walter Dauge refusing to go underground. [1] Dauge was a former member of the Socialist Party and Stutje claims he brought 700 members in the Borinage mining region into the section, of whom only a handful remained active after the German invasion on 10th May 1940.

By the time the Belgian section had been rebuilt under German occupation in August/September that year, Monath was in the leadership, along with 17-year-old Mandel. Again, his activities over the following three years are uncertain – apart from his attendance at Central Committee meetings – according to information coming from Mandel. It is possible that he participated in a meeting to set up a European Secretariat of the FI in the Ardennes in January 1942. [2] The Trotskyists in Belgium were active in supporting struggles during the occupation and involved in publishing resistance papers in French and Flemish. Stutje states that their influence waned after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, after which the European Communist parties rediscovered their opposition to German fascism.

Arbeiter und Soldat

Around April 1943, the Trotskyists of the Parti Ouvrière Internationaliste in Brest, Brittany, where there was a large German naval base – with attendant soldiers defending it – started to publish a paper aimed at German soldiers. Printed in the book are the remnants of issue number 2 (summer 1943), containing somewhat politically naïve anti-war statements by the soldiers themselves. The aim was to organise revolutionary cells in the German army, in anticipation of its disintegration as defeat loomed. This, of course, had happened in many countries at the end of World War I. The possible reasons for the failure of this strategy in at the end of World War II will be discussed in the next section.

A small cell was formed in Brest and Monath, as a German speaker, was moved to Paris, presumably to centralise and spread this activity. The first issue of *Arbeiter und Soldat* – a more professional paper, with highly political analysis of the war and related questions – appeared in July 1943. Leaflets were also published, aimed at German soldiers who by now were probably aware of the impending defeat.

The Brest cell was betrayed by one of the German soldiers at the beginning of October and up to 50 soldiers and 50 French activists were arrested. The French section was badly hit, including in Paris, as addresses of members of the leadership were found. Some of them were shot and some were sent to Buchenwald, from which not all returned. Flakin gives an account of these events that suggests that previous estimates of the influence and actions of the Brest group were exaggerated.

Monath fled to Belgium, returning to Paris a couple of months after the raid, attending the European Conference of the FI in January 1944 and producing more issues of *Arbeiter und Soldat* from May. Flakin gives a sad and dramatic description of Martin Monath’s final days, following his capture by the French police in July. The most that is known about Monath is the few days leading up to his death, pieced together from accounts by his comrades, who were desperately trying to rescue him from the clutches of the authorities. Monath disappeared about a week before the resistance called a general strike in Paris, prior to the city’s liberation from Nazi occupation.

Lessons

Nathaniel Flakin includes in the book a new translation of every edition of *Arbeiter und Soldat*. [3] This allows us to see how the editors interpreted the FI’s position on WWII for the specific task of winning over German soldiers. [4]

I am no expert on this matter, which is complex and now difficult to assess after such a long time. The FI policy essentially took the view that the bourgeois democracies were not interested in defeating fascism and that for them this was a war for markets and influence. Britain and France were defending their colonial empires and desperately trying to maintain their competitive positions in the world economy.

The ruling class in all imperialist countries were willing to sacrifice the lives and livelihoods of the working class and oppressed in the metropolises and colonies in pursuit of this objective, so for the FI there should be no pact between the oppressed and exploited and their own bourgeoisie. The best means of ending the war was to fight for a revolution in your own country.

This was the successful policy pursued by the Bolsheviks in Russia, which hastened the end of WWI. Post-war revolutionary uprisings in Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria testified to the hostility of the masses to their own ruling classes. Clearly, in the Second World War, the policy failed (except – in part – in Yugoslavia and China). But that does not mean it was doomed from the start. In fact, it was the only possible means of averting the mass slaughter that actually took place.

The Achilles heel of this “revolutionary defeatist” position is that it depended on the widespread acceptance by the working class masses – and especially those in the respective armed forces – of the concept of worldwide proletarian unity: that their “enemy” was not an enemy but the working class in uniform. Given the widespread support of the masses for Communist Parties prior to the war and the fact that many of the Social Democratic Parties had not yet formally abandoned Marxism, this was not such a ludicrous idea. A large proportion of the ranks of the Wehrmacht – for example – would have been supporters of or had family members supporting these parties.

It is possible to find indications of the political fragility of the hold of Nazi ideology in the ranks and this book gives a minor example. There are also reports of soldiers deserting and joining the Maquis resistance in France and of others pretending to their squad commanders that they had not located Jews or resistance fighters when carrying out searches. [5] The bureaucracy also fostered the most vicious xenophobia in the ranks of its advancing army, something which David Broder argues is responsible for the “vengeance exacted on the German people at the end of the war, including hundreds of thousands of rapes by Russian troops” (see footnote 3).

Arbeiter und Soldat describes Stalinism as having “introduced a national policy of attacking the German soldier” and having “dropped the policy of revolutionary fraternization in favour of fraternization with our own gang of exploiters”. It concludes that “Staline (sic) strengthens Hitler, since German soldiers only encounter hatred everywhere, do not find a solution, and are ultimately pushed back into Hitler’s arms, who tells them that Germany must triumph over Europe in order to survive”.

Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter movement has rightly put the records of numerous “revered” figureheads into the public eye, not least Winston Churchill. Let’s just list four major crimes committed by his National government:

– The failure to take any action against – or even properly to publicise the existence of – the Nazi extermination camps. [6]

“Martin Monath: A Jewish Resistance Fighter Among Nazi Soldiers”

- The deliberate bombing of civilian areas in German cities. [7]
- The joint development of the atomic bomb and the decision to pulverise the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Those who argue that nothing should have been done to impede the military efforts of the bourgeois democracies make light of or even justify these crimes. They state that the troops needed to be fed with Indian rice, that civilian bombing would “turn” the German people against the regime, that the atom bomb shortened the war in the East. [8] Presumably, doing nothing serious about the concentration camps – ignoring the pleas of the Polish government in exile– also had some political-military “justification” in the eyes of the allied powers. [9]

It is not just Churchill and his government that need to shoulder this burden. World War II was the product of capitalism which is still with us. It is prepared to defend its system of exploitation and oppression at the cost of tens of millions of lives. The opposite course, advocated by the FI and their comrades publishing *Arbeiter und Soldat*, cannot be dismissed as mere “counterfactual” history. Nathaniel Flakin has made a significant contribution to the argument that it was the only humane option.

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[1] Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, Verso 2009, p18

[2] Rodolphe Prager, [“The Fourth International During the Second World War”](#).

[3] Another translation is also available [here](#).

[4] See [“Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian Revolution”](#) and the US SWP’s [“Resolution on the Proletarian Military Policy”](#).

[5] In Suzanne Berliner Weiss *Holocaust to Resistance* reviewed [here](#) The problem was, as Nathaniel Flakin points out “had there been 1,000 or 10,000 Bolshevik cadres [in France] the whole world war might have turned out differently”. Such numbers (and many more) were most likely to have come from the ranks of the French Communist Party.

Instead, we had a Party paralysed by the Hitler-Stalin Pact and subsequently immobilised by its subservience to the imperialist democracies. Instead of an internationalist outlook, its slogan was designed to spread national hatred: “everyone united against the Boches!”. On top of that, just to make things more difficult in Germany itself, you had the Soviet bureaucracy creating in 1943 – when it was obvious that the war was lost – in the words of *Arbeiter und Soldat* “a committee for a “Free Germany” with Hitler generals, barons and counts who have become prisoners of war”.^{[[Wikipedia, [National Committee for a Free Germany](#).}

[6] *The Independent* “[Allied forces knew about Holocaust two years before discovery of concentration camps, secret documents reveal](#)”, see also the discussion in the British Parliament [Hansard 17 December 1942](#).

[7] University of Exeter [“The Bombing of Germany Exhibition 1940-45”](#).
– The Bengal famine of 1943-45, in which at least 3 million people died.^{[[*The Guardian*, 29 March 2019 [“Churchill's policies contributed to 1943 Bengal famine – study”](#).}

[8] Rutger Bregman in his interesting new book *Human Kind* argues that it was known at the time from studies of the effects of the Blitz that its effect was to make British civilians less critical of the government, but their advisers claimed this was due to the British “stiff upper lip” and that

“Martin Monath: A Jewish Resistance Fighter Among Nazi Soldiers”

Germans were “different”. *Arbeiter und Soldat* says that bombing working class districts would “heighten bitterness”, but the English text is not clear against whom. Reference 8 shows the effect was to strengthen the ideological hold of the Nazi regime, exactly as happened in Britain. Totals killed by bombs 1940-5: Britain 61,000, Germany approx. 460,000. See the refutation of the latter argument in Ernest Mandel *The Meaning of the Second World War*, Verso 1986 pp147-8. Also: David Horowitz, *From Yalta to Vietnam*, Penguin 1967 pp53-6. Horowitz is now a Breitbart Islamophobe, but his account of over 50 years ago – when he was a Marxist – is convincing and fully referenced.

[9] *The Guardian*, 22 January 2020 “The Volunteer by Jack Fairweather review – the hero who infiltrated Auschwitz”.