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Trotskyists and the Second World War

1976 - Trotskyists and Resistance in the Second World War

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

Publication date: Tuesday 31 May 2005

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I want to go into the question of the resistance movement in Europe between 1940 and 1944 in detail. I want to do so especially because some comrades for whom I have respect, and whom I hope to see back in the Fourth International, the comrades of the Lutte Ouvrière group in France, have made it their special point of honour to raise this question against the Fourth International.

From the foundation of the Communist International, communists were educated in a principled rejection of the idea of "national defence" or "defence of the fatherland" in the imperialist countries. This meant a total refusal to have anything to do with imperialist wars. The Trotskyist movement was educated in the same spirit.

This was all the more necessary with the right-wing turn of the Comintern and the Stalin-Laval pact in 1935, which turned the Stalinists in the West European countries, and in some colonial countries, into the worst advocates of pro-imperialist chauvinism.

In India, for instance, this led to the disastrous betrayal by the Stalinists of the national uprising in 1942. When the uprising took place, the British colonialists opened the jails for the leaders of the Indian Communist Party in order to transform them into agitators against the uprising and for the imperialist war. This tremendous betrayal laid the basis for the continuous mass influence of the bourgeois nationalist Congress Party in the following decades.

Our movement was inoculated against nationalism in imperialist countries, against the idea of supporting imperialist war efforts in any form whatsoever. That was a good education, and I do not propose to revise that tradition. But what it left out of account were elements of the much more complex Leninist position in the First World War.

It is simply not true that Lenin's position then can be reduced to the formula: "This is a reactionary imperialist war. We have nothing to do with it." Lenin's position was much more sophisticated. He said: "There are at least two wars, and we want to introduce a third one." (The third one was the proletarian civil war against the bourgeoisie which in actual fact came out of the war in Russia.)

Lenin fought a determined struggle against sectarian currents inside the internationalist tendency who did not recognise the distinction between these two wars. He pointed out: "There is an inter-imperialist war. With that war we have nothing to do. But there are also wars of national uprising by oppressed nationalities. The Irish uprising is 100 per cent justified. Even if German imperialism tries to profit from it, even if leaders of the national movement link up with German submarines, this does not change the just nature of the Irish war of independence against British imperialism.

The same thing is true for the national movement in the colonies and the semi-colonies, the Indian movement, the Turkish movement, the Persian movement." And he added: "The same thing is true for the oppressed nationalities in Russia and Austro-Hungary. The Polish national movement is a just movement, the Czech national movement is a just movement. A movement by any oppressed nationality against the imperialist oppressor is a just movement. And the fact that the leadership of these movements could betray by linking these movements politically and organizationally to imperialism is a reason to denounce these leaders, not a reason to condemn these movements."

Now if we look at the problem of World War II from that more dialectical, more correct Leninist point of view, we have to say that it was a very complicated business indeed. I would say, at the risk of putting it a bit too strongly, that the

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Second World War was in reality a combination of five different wars. That may seem an outrageous proposition at first sight, but I think closer examination will bear it out.

First, there was an inter-imperialist war, a war between the Nazi, Italian, and Japanese imperialists on the one hand, and the Anglo-American-French imperialists on the other hand. That was a reactionary war, a war between different groups of imperialist powers. We had nothing to do with that war, we were totally against it.

[<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L300xH227/victoryparade-2-4f26c.jpg>] Stalin's victory parade - Soviet troops dump Nazi standards at his feet

Second, there was a just war of self-defence by the people of China, an oppressed semi-colonial country, against Japanese imperialism. At no moment was Chiang Kai-shek's alliance with American imperialism a justification for any revolutionary to change their judgement on the nature of the Chinese war. It was a war of national liberation against a robber gang, the Japanese imperialists, who wanted to enslave the Chinese people. Trotsky was absolutely clear and unambiguous on this. That war of independence started before the Second World War, in 1937; in a certain sense, it started in 1931 with the Japanese Manchurian adventure. It became intertwined with the Second World War, but it remained a separate and autonomous ingredient of it.

Third, there was a just war of national defence of the Soviet Union, a workers state, against an imperialist power. The fact that the Soviet leadership allied itself not only in a military way - which was absolutely justified - but also politically with the Western imperialists in no way changed the just nature of that war. The war of the Soviet workers and peasants, of the Soviet peoples and the Soviet state, to defend the Soviet Union against German imperialism was a just war from any Marxist-Leninist point of view. In that war we were 100 per cent for the victory of one camp, without any reservations or question marks. We were for absolute victory of the Soviet people against the murderous robbers of German imperialism.

Fourth, there was a just war of national liberation of the oppressed colonial peoples of Africa and Asia (in Latin America there was no such war), launched by the masses against British and French imperialism, sometimes against Japanese imperialism, and sometimes against both in succession, one after the other. Again, these were absolutely justified wars of national liberation, regardless of the particular character of the imperialist power.

We were just as much for the victory of the Indian people's uprising against British imperialism, and the small beginnings of the uprising in Ceylon, as we were in favour of the victory of the Burmese, Indochinese, and Indonesian guerrillas against Japanese, French, and Dutch imperialism successively. In the Philippines the situation was even more complex. I do not want to go into all the details, but the basic point is that all these wars of national liberation were just wars, regardless of the nature of their political leadership. You do not have to place any political confidence in or give any political support to the leaders of a particular struggle in order to recognise the justness of that struggle. When a strike is led by treacherous trade union bureaucrats you do not put any trust in them - but nor do you stop supporting the strike.

Now I come to the fifth war, which is the most complex. I would not say that it was going on in the whole of Europe occupied by Nazi imperialism, but more especially in two countries, Yugoslavia and Greece, to a great extent in Poland, and incipiently in France and Italy. That was a war of liberation by the oppressed workers, peasants, and urban petty bourgeoisie against the German Nazi imperialists and their stooges. To deny the autonomous nature of that war means saying in reality that the workers and peasants of Western Europe had no right to fight against those who were enslaving them at that moment unless their minds were set clearly against bringing in other enslavers in place of the existing ones. That is an unacceptable position.

It is true that if the leadership of that mass resistance remained in the hands of bourgeois nationalists, of Stalinists or social democrats, it could eventually be sold out to the Western imperialists. It was the duty of the revolutionaries to prevent this from happening by trying to oust these fakers from the leadership of the movement. But it was

impossible to prevent such a betrayal by abstaining from participating in that movement.

What lay behind that fifth war? It was the inhuman conditions which existed in the occupied countries. How can anyone doubt that? How can anyone tell us that the real reason for the uprising was some ideological framework - such as the chauvinism of the French people or of the CP leadership? Such an explanation is nonsense. People did not fight because they were chauvinists. People were fighting because they were hungry, because they were over-exploited, because there were mass deportations of slave labour to Germany, because there was mass slaughter, because there were concentration camps, because there was no right to strike, because unions were banned, because communists, socialists and trade unionists were being put in prison.

That's why people were rising, and not because they were chauvinists. They were often chauvinists too, but that was not the main reason. The main reason was their inhuman material living conditions, their social, political, and national oppression, which was so intolerable that it pushed millions onto the road of struggle. And you have to answer the question: was it a just struggle, or was it wrong to rise against this over-exploitation and oppression? Who can seriously argue that the working class of Western or Eastern Europe should have abstained or remained passive towards the horrors of Nazi oppression and Nazi occupation? That position is indefensible.

So the only correct position was to say that there was a fifth war which was also an autonomous aspect of what was going on between 1939 and 1945. The correct revolutionary Marxist position (I say this with a certain apologetic tendency, because it was the one defended from the beginning by the Belgian Trotskyists against what I would call both the right wing and the ultra-left wing of the European Trotskyist movement at that time) should have been as follows: to support fully all mass struggles and uprisings, whether armed or unarmed, against Nazi imperialism in occupied Europe, in order to fight to transform them into a victorious socialist revolution - that is, to fight to oust from the leadership of the struggles those who were linking them up with the Western imperialists, and who wanted in reality to maintain capitalism at the end of the war, as in fact happened.

We have to understand that what started in Europe in 1941 was a genuine new variant of a process of permanent revolution, which could transform that resistance movement into a socialist revolution. I say, "could", but in at least one example that was what actually happened. It happened in Yugoslavia. That's exactly what the Yugoslav Communists did.

Whatever our criticisms of the bureaucratic way in which they did it, the crimes they committed in the course of it, or the political and ideological deviations which accompanied that process, fundamentally that is what they did. We have no intention of being apologists for Tito, but we have to understand what he did. It was an amazing thing. At the start of the uprising in 1941 the Yugoslav CP had a mere 5,000 active participants.

Yet in 1945 they took power at the head of an army of half a million workers and peasants. That was no small feat. They saw the possibility and the opportunity. They behaved as revolutionaries - bureaucratic-centrist revolutionaries of Stalinist origin, if you like, but you cannot call that counter-revolutionary. They destroyed capitalism. It was not the Soviet army, it was not Stalin, as a result of the "cold war", who destroyed capitalism in Yugoslavia. It was the Yugoslav CP which led this struggle, accompanied by a big fight against Stalin.

All the proofs are there - all the letters sent by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Yugoslavs, saying: "Do not attack private property. Do not push the Americans into hostility to the Soviet Union by attacking private property." And Tito and the leaders of the Communist Party did not give a damn about what Stalin told them to do or not to do. They led a genuine process of permanent revolution in the historical sense of the word, transformed a mass uprising against foreign imperialist occupation - an uprising which started on an inter-class basis, but under a bureaucratic proletarian leadership - into a genuine socialist revolution.

At the end of 1945, Yugoslavia became a workers state. There was a tremendous mass uprising in 1944-45, the workers took over the factories, the land was taken over by the peasants (and later by the state, in an exaggerated and over-centralised manner). Private property was largely destroyed. Nobody can really deny that the Yugoslav Communist Party destroyed capitalism, even if it was through its own bureaucratic methods, repressing workers democracy, even shooting some people whom it accused of being Trotskyists (which was not true - there was no Trotskyist section in Yugoslavia then or at any time previously). And it did not destroy capitalism through some bureaucratic moves with a foreign army, as in Eastern Europe, but through a genuine popular revolution, a huge mass mobilisation, one of the hugest ever seen in Europe. You should study the history of what happened in Yugoslavia - how, as bourgeois writers say, in every single village there was a civil war. That's the truth of it. The only comparison you can make is with Vietnam.

So I think that revolutionaries should basically have tried to do in the other occupied countries what the Yugoslav Communists did in Yugoslavia - of course with better methods and better results, leading to workers democracy and workers power directly exercised by workers councils, and not by a bureaucratized workers party and a privileged bureaucracy.

That is not to say at all that it was our fault if the proletarian revolution failed in Europe in 1945, because we did not apply the correct line in the resistance movement. That would be ridiculous. Even with the best of lines, the relationship of forces was such that we would not have succeeded.

The relationship of forces between the Communist parties and us, the prestige of the CPs, the links of the CPs with the Soviet Union, the low level of working class consciousness as a result of a long period of defeats - all that made it impossible for the Trotskyists really to compete with the Stalinists for the leadership of the mass movement. So the mistakes which were made, both in a right-wing sense and in an ultra-left sense, actually had very little effect on history. They are simply lessons from which we have to draw a political conclusion in order not to repeat these mistakes in future. We cannot say that we failed to influence history as a result of these mistakes.

These lessons were of a dual nature. The leading comrades of one of the two French Trotskyist organizations, the POI (which was the official section), made right-wing mistakes in 1940-41. There is no doubt about that. They started from a correct line essentially, the one I have just outlined, but they took it one step too far. In the implementation of that line they included temporary blocs with what they called the "national bourgeoisie".

I should add they were able to use one sentence by Trotsky in support of their position. Remember that before arriving too hastily at a judgement on these questions. This sentence came at the beginning of one of Trotsky's last articles: "France is being transformed into an oppressed nation." In an oppressed nation there is no principled reason to reject temporary, tactical agreements with the "national bourgeoisie" against imperialism. There are conditions: we do not make a political bloc with the bourgeoisie. But purely tactical agreements with the national bourgeoisie are acceptable. We should, for instance, have made such an agreement in the 1942 uprising in India. It is a question of tactics, not of principle.

What was wrong in the position of the POI leadership was to make an extrapolation from a temporary, conjuncture situation. If France had permanently become a semi-colonial country, that would have been another story. But it was a temporary situation, just an episode in the war. France remained an imperialist power, with imperialist structures, which continued through the Gaullist operation to exploit many colonial peoples and maintain its empire in Africa intact. To change one's attitude towards the bourgeoisie simply in the light of what happened over a couple of years on the territory of France was a premature move which contained within it the seed of major political mistakes.

In fact it did not lead to anything in practice. Those who say that the French Trotskyists "betrayed" by making a bloc with the bourgeoisie in 1940-41 do not understand the difference between the beginning of a theoretical mistake and

an actual treacherous intervention in the class struggle. There was never any agreement with the bourgeoisie, never any support for them when it came to the point.

Whenever strikes took place the French Trotskyists were 100 per cent on the side of the workers. Whether it was a strike against French capitalists, German capitalists, or a combination of both, they were on the side of the workers every time. So where was the betrayal? It just confuses a possible political mistake and an actual theoretical one - which eventually could perhaps have had grave consequences, but in actual fact never did. That it was a mistake I naturally do not deny. But I think the comrades of the POI minority who fought against it did a good job, and by 1942 it was reversed and did not come up again.

The sectarian mistake, however, was in my opinion much graver. Here the ultra-left wing of the Trotskyist movement denied any progressive ingredient in the resistance movement and refused to make any distinction between the mass resistance, the armed mass struggle, and the manoeuvres and plans of the bourgeois nationalist, social democratic or Stalinist misleaders of the masses. That mistake was much worse because it led to abstention on what were important living struggles of the masses. Those comrades (such as the Lutte Ouvrière group) who persist even today in identifying the mass movements in the occupied countries with imperialism - saying that the war in Yugoslavia was an imperialist war because it was conducted by nationalists - are completely revising the Marxist method.

Instead of defining the class nature of a mass movement by its objective roots and significance, they try to do so on the basis of its ideology. This is an unacceptable backward step towards historical idealism. When workers rise against exploitation and oppression with nationalist slogans, you say: "The rising is correct; please change the slogans." You do not say: "The rising is bad because the slogans are bad." It does not become bourgeois because the slogans are bourgeois - that is a wrong and absolutely unmaterialist approach.

Trotsky warned the Trotskyist movement against precisely such mistakes in his last basic document, the Manifesto of the 1940 emergency conference. He pointed out that they should be careful not to judge workers in the same way as the bourgeoisie even when they talked about national defence. It was necessary to distinguish between what they said and what they meant - to judge the objective historical nature of their intervention rather than the words they used. And the fact that sectarian sections of the Trotskyist movement did not understand that, and took an abstentionist position on big clashes involving hundreds of thousands or even millions of people, was very dangerous for the future of the Fourth International.

To abstain from such clashes on ideological grounds would have been absolutely suicidal for a living revolutionary movement. But we had no section in Yugoslavia. And had we had one, it would happily not have been sectarian. Otherwise we could not address the Yugoslav Communists and workers with the authority which we have today. Our first intervention in Yugoslavia was only in 1948; it was a good one, and so now we can speak with an unblemished banner and considerable moral authority in Yugoslavia.

But if the Lutte Ouvrière line had been applied in practice between 1941 and 1944 in Yugoslavia, and if Yugoslav Trotskyists had been neutral in that civil war, we would not be very proud today and we would certainly not be in a strong position to defend the programme of the Fourth International. As it is, some of the Yugoslav Communists who later became Trotskyists were heroes in the civil war, which gives them a certain standing and moral authority. It makes it easier for them and for us to discuss Trotskyism in Yugoslavia today. If we had to carry the moral blemish of passivity and abstention in a huge civil war, we would, to say the least, be in a very bad position today.

This article is an excerpt from the transcript of a school on the history of the Fourth International organised by the International Marxist Group in London in 1976.