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Review: Standing Against Counterrevolution - Split in the US SWP

Saturday 21 January 2017, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2016).

Review of *The Two Trotskyisms Confront Stalinism. The Fate of the Russian Revolution, Volume 2. Edited & with an introduction by Sean Matgamna. London, UK: Workers' Liberty, 2015, 790 pages, \$30 paperback. [1].*

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ON JULY 23, 1939 the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed an agreement that would be known to history as the infamous Stalin-Hitler Pact. A week later, pursuant to secret clauses in the deal, German troops smashed into Poland and on September 17 the Soviet Union invaded from the east.

The impact on global politics was overwhelming; in essence it marked the beginning of the Second World War. The crisis soon further deepened when the Soviet Union invaded Finland.

The impact on the left was no less shattering. One example among many: In August 1939, the U.S. Communist Party in the heavily Polish-American industrial city of Hamtramck, Michigan had hundreds of auto worker members. By September, effectively nothing remained of it.

The large collection of documents, articles and speeches reviewed here focuses on a more specific issue: how the war, particularly in the way it broke out, impacted the theory, politics and organizational unity of the American Trotskyist movement. It was one of the leading forces in the newly formed Fourth International, and one of the very few that would be able to function throughout with considerable democratic freedom (despite the wartime imprisonment of leaders of the Socialist Workers Party under the Smith Act), above all without the imminent threat of murder or concentration camp internment.

This is the second volume under the title "The Fate of the Russian Revolution" published by a British Marxist group, Alliance for Workers Liberty. [2] A third volume is projected on other topics, including "the Trotskyists and the Jewish Question in the period of the Holocaust."

As with the first volume, AWL leading figure Sean Matgamna provides a lengthy historical overview plus timeline and glossary of names. (11-125) Readers should be aware that this "Introduction: Leon Trotsky and the Two Trotskyisms" presents AWL's distinctive viewpoint on the period and the movement's subsequent factional history, one sharply hostile to the "Orthodox" side of the argument. That belongs to a separate discussion.

As many readers will already know, the SWP went through a major split in 1940, shortly before the

murder of Leon Trotsky by Stalin's agents in Mexico. It is generally understood that the split, in which the minority formed the rival Workers Party, was over "The Russian Question" (and some tangled organizational issues — a quite literal "who stole the chairs" episode is recorded here). But that heading is too broad to precisely identify what happened, or why it still has present-day relevance.

I'll try to address those questions here, but to cover the collection thoroughly would require a review essay well beyond the space available. Instead, recognizing that for some readers this material will be new while others will have decades of familiarity with the raging debates over "the class nature of the Soviet Union" and "the petit-bourgeois opposition" along with other epithets, I'll leave those already initiated to navigate for themselves.

The Debate Opens

In what follows here I'll be aiming primarily at the first-time readership. The best entry point into this massive collection, I think, is not at the very beginning but rather the speeches by James P. Cannon and Max Shachtman at the New York SWP branch on October 15, 1939 as the crisis erupted in Europe and engulfed the international left. (176-217. What would it be worth to go back as a fly on the wall there?)

In these detailed presentations, the issues and contradictions that divided and fractured the Trotskyist movement are all foreshadowed, and the subsequent polemics will fall into place. That the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy ruled a "degenerated workers' state," having formed a monstrous totalitarian regime and acting as "an agent of imperialism" but still resting on the base of nationalized property (means of production) that remained the priceless conquest of the working class upheaval that produced the Russian Revolution, was not in question — yet. But that common assumption could not cover over a growing chasm over the meaning of the events unfolding in Europe.

Speaking for the National Committee and Political Committee majority, Cannon lays out the perspective that nothing has fundamentally changed in the party's formula, "In brief: The theoretical analysis - a degenerated Workers' State. The political conclusion — unconditional defense against external attacks of imperialists or internal attempts at capitalist restoration."

Against the minority's view that the "unconditional defense of the Soviet Union" was no longer fully sustainable, Cannon insists repeatedly that despite all of Stalin's crimes, nationalized property won through the revolution remains a decisive factor: "(N)ever surrender any position before it is lost; the worst of all capitulators is the one who capitulates before the decisive battle." (178)

It was a telling challenge, which would ultimately force the minority to re-think fundamental assumptions and to conclude that the battle actually had been lost — that nationalized property in and of itself, after being stripped of any shred of working-class control, indeed where that nationalized property had become a tool in the hands of the bureaucracy for the exploitation and immiseration of the workers, had no progressive or revolutionary class content.

This would become the core of the theory of "Bureaucratic Collectivism," but that lay in the future.

Shachtman, speaking for the party minority, argues that the "unconditional defense" position must be scrutinized not in the light of the degenerated workers' state theory, but rather in the context of "the nature of the war." Indeed, "(t)he question of Stalin's invasion of Poland and of the Baltic countries is the question of today, and that is the one we must answer first..." (211)

Here the majority faced a problem: While Trotsky from Mexican exile had condemned Stalin's invasion of Poland as a crime against the world socialist revolution, a few members of the SWP majority called for supporting it, and Cannon himself regarded it as a military "episode" on which he would not issue judgment.

Stalin's invasion of Poland, not in any defensive action but in collusion with Hitler's Germany, inevitably posed the question of whether the Soviet Union itself was "imperialist" and what that might mean. Says Cannon, any such consideration "would mean a rejection of all our theoretical preparation for the war." (189) After all, the party had already taken into account the likelihood of Soviet tactical alliances with either the fascist or "democratic" imperialist states, and both had indeed come to pass.

Shachtman, pushing the theoretical envelope about as far as possible in the context of 1939, posits that "I do not believe that the Stalinist bureaucracy represents a new class, in any case none comparable with the great historic classes of society like the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But in the sense in which Marx used the term to describe the Bonapartist bureaucracy [i.e. of mid-19th century France under Louis Bonaparte — DF], so, too, the Stalinist is an 'artificial class.' It seeks new resources of labour and of raw materials, markets, seaports, gold stores, and the like...it is interested in a growing national income only for its own sake. Only in order to enhance its privileges and power — economic, social and political...the Stalinist regime seeks to resolve its domestic crisis by a policy which we cannot characterize as anything but imperialist." (210)

Looking Backward and Forward

Naturally there is a great deal more on both sides of the debate than can be properly presented here, but this cryptic overview gives some idea of the complexity of the issues and what was at stake as revolutionary Marxists grappled theoretically with a rapidly moving target, and politically with deeply disturbing new realities.

Did the Soviet invasions of Poland and Finland represent potentially an expansion of the proletarian revolution? Should the workers of Finland, who had suffered murderous repression under a rightwing post-World War I dictatorship, welcome the Soviet army as liberators, or would they (or their children) be waging guerilla resistance against the invaders?

Essentially, everything else in this volume represents in detail the working out of these respective positions and their consequences — not in retrospect but in the white heat of events, with the protagonists on both sides of "the two Trotskyisms" acutely feeling the weight of responsibility for a struggling world movement.

Does any of this much matter now, when the Soviet Union has passed into history and when what was known as "Trotskyism" has been transformed almost beyond recognition? In my own view, there are things to be learned here from both the strengths and weaknesses evidenced in these debates. (Disclosure: Like those of the editors of this collection, this reviewer's sympathies are with the so-called Shachtmanite or "Third Camp" side, but I'm not arguing the point here.)

On the positive side, the discussions of the essential relationship of democratic to revolutionary socialist struggles, and the application of historical materialism to understanding the nature of capitalist imperialism and the Stalinist counterrevolution, are frankly on a higher level here than much of what passes for present left discourse. See for example Jean van Heijenoort's concise theorization in 1945 of "The eruption of bureaucratic imperialism." (386-94)

On the negative side, it's impossible to overlook the heavily male-dominated and frankly often "masculinist" character of the polemics on all sides. If I'm not mistaken (some contributions are unsigned editorials), with the exception of Trotsky's widow Natalia Sedova all the authors are men. Neither of the women leaders of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Raya Dunayevskaya (Freddie Forest) or Grace Lee (Ria Stone, later Grace Lee Boggs) are represented.

As is generally the rule in faction fights, other issues arose, one of which was Trotsky's insistent demand to create a party that would be "habitable for workers" rather than dominated by intellectuals. The name-calling around this serves as a reminder that this problem hasn't been satisfactorily resolved, and that as many of us learned from painful experience, factional warfare creates pretty much the worst atmosphere for addressing it.

If the 1939 speeches of Cannon and Shachtman frame the debate between "two Trotskyisms" as a whole, the concluding section of "Essays" sum up many of the conclusions drawn from it. For me, Shachtman's extensive 1954 critique "Isaac Deutscher and the End of Socialism" (655-706) is particularly important. In fairness, it should be noted that Cannon similarly savaged Deutscher's apologetic analogy of Stalin with Napoleon's carrying the French Revolution into the rest of Europe.

There is both a tragic and yet heroic character to this material. Perhaps the fighting spirit of a movement standing up against both capitalist and Stalinist counterrevolution is captured in Shachtman's October 1939 speech to the membership:

"I am not a Finnish patriot any more than I am a Polish patriot. But as a revolutionary Marxist I am also a consistent democrat. I am ready to subordinate democratic considerations only to socialist and internationalist considerations...I am prepared to subordinate even these [national and democratic rights of Finland and the Baltic countries] to the interests of the socialist revolution if and where the two conflict. I am not ready to subordinate them to the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy." (204)

[For further reading: *Peter Drucker's Max Shachtman and his Left* (1994) is a careful study of the man and his movement. Bryan D. Palmer's *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left 1890-1928* is the first of a multi-volume biography in progress (2007). The relevant chapters in Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals* (1987), particularly "Cannonites and Shachtmanites," offer a well-rounded and non-factional account of some of the main figures and their evolution.]

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P.S.

* Against the Current n° 182. May/June 2016:
<http://solidarity-us.org/node/4657>

Footnotes

[1] Order from www.workersliberty.org/books

[2] Peter Drucker's review of the first volume from ATC 93 is online at ESSF (article 40073), [Review: Max Shachtman and Stalinism in Hindsight..](#)