

# Some Further Notes on Left-libertarian Opposition to War

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Anarchist and libertarian socialist opposition to capitalist war goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Even in the 1920s and '30s, with the rise of Fascism, many revolutionaries continued to believe that the anti-war arguments of the earlier period were far from outdated. They felt that it was still valid to assert that the enemy of the working class and revolutionaries in all countries was the bourgeoisie in all countries, whether it was "democratic" or "fascist." They continued to believe that it was necessary for revolutionaries to concentrate on social change within their own countries rather than on assisting one bourgeoisie against its rivals.

But the left was gravely split on the issue of war, both because of the rise of the USSR and the development of Fascism in a number of countries. Some leftists, including some anarchists and libertarian socialists, felt that it was necessary to ally themselves closely with the national bourgeoisies of various countries, no matter how distasteful, in order to fight Fascism. They argued that the proletariat and the revolutionary movements would be crushed and demoralized by Fascism, especially since they were substantially weakened by the splits and confusion caused by the Bolshevik takeover in Russia, the development of communist parties throughout the world and the consolidation of reformist socialist politics. This debate is discussed in the pamphlet *THIRD-CAMP INTERNATIONALISTS IN FRANCE DURING WORLD WAR II* by Ernest Rayner.

The debate was further confused by the position taken by those leftists who identified with Marxist-Leninist parties and the Soviet Union. In 1902, Hobson described the phenomenon of capitalist imperialism and Luxemburg and Hilferding later both elaborated with respect to capitalist-colonialist conquests and rivalries between nation-states. Their aim was to further understand the reasons for wars between nation-states despite the shared interests of different national bourgeoisies. But Lenin adopted this concept to simplistically distinguish between nation-states in order to justify some forms of nationalism while condemning others. He classified some states as "imperialist" and others as "anti-imperialist." According to Lenin, imperialism was to be understood as the ineluctable expression of the most advanced form of capitalism. Those nation-states which imposed colonial rule on others were imperialist and those nationalists in the colonies who fought for the establishment of their own nation-states and the local domination of their own bourgeoisies were designated as anti-imperialist, and worth supporting no matter how brutal the repression they inflicted on their own populations. It was this logic that led the Soviet Union to

support the Chiang Kai-shek clique through the 1920s and beyond. For the Marxist-Leninists, the important issue was that the nationalist struggle helped to undermine the advanced capitalist countries and the international capitalist order.

This logic also led the Leninists to tolerate, and sometimes even cooperate with, both the Mussolini Fascists and the German Nazis before and even after their rise to power. The Fascists and Nazis were viewed as offering resistance to US, British, Japanese and especially French imperialism. The rulers of the USSR were frightened by the German Weimar Republic government's alignment with the Western imperialist states. They feared that it would result in aggression against the Soviet Union. Because they viewed the Nazis as opposing this alignment with the Western powers, they classified the Nazi political perspective as anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. Only after the Nazi government signed a non-aggression pact with the Polish government in January, 1934 did the Soviet government and the Comintern begin speaking of cooperation with socialists and democrats in order to combat Fascism. This subject is discussed in further detail in *HITLER PREND LE POUVOIR (HITLER TAKES POWER)* by Georges Goriely; Brussels 1985, as well as in a number of books in English, including works by Gabriel Kolko, E.H. Carr and Howard Zinn.

But many libertarians understood Fascism as "*an extreme form of capitalist authoritarianism*," to use Emma Goldman's phrase. They understood that it was necessary to evaluate Fascism by the same standards and oppose it for the same reasons as those used to judge other forms of capitalism. These were the same standards which enabled them to comprehend that nationalism and authoritarianism in the Soviet Union led to consolidation rather than destruction of the class system and exploitation. It was all too painfully clear that authoritarian communist anti-Fascists and democratic capitalist anti-Fascists were both primarily interested in defeating political rivals, rather than in challenging the state system and nationalism as part of the system of elite domination. With this understanding many libertarians (including anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, libertarian socialists and council communists) argued from the '20s on that it would do no good to make compromises in order to cooperate with groups diametrically opposed to libertarian goals. Eventually, if not immediately, such cooperation would make it impossible for libertarians to gain anything. Whatever gains would come from a victory over Fascism would be outweighed by the suffering of the ordinary people in the struggle, and the entrenchment of the capitalist system resulting from the victory of the authoritarian communists or democratic capitalists. The development of this perspective is very well discussed in *ANTI-PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNISM: The movement for workers' councils in Britain 1917-1945* by Mark Shipway.

The experiences of the mid-1930s, especially in the popular fronts of various

countries and particularly in the Spanish Revolution, strengthened some peoples' belief in the necessity of all anti-Fascists working together. At the same time, it became even clearer to many that fruitful cooperation was only possible between people who shared long-term social goals. While many anarchists appreciated cooperating with libertarian socialists, council communists and a variety of other non-authoritarians, they came to understand that there were grave dangers for libertarians in cooperating with many liberal democrats and authoritarian socialists. In Spain the CNT-FAI was divided over this issue. The Friends of Durutti, which was founded after the death of this heroic anarchist fighter in the defense of Madrid against the Francoists, carried on his opposition to compromise-cooperation with state-oriented anti-Fascists. They believed that those anarchists and others who had set aside their revolutionary goals to help the bourgeois Spanish Republic defeat the Fascists had gained nothing. They had only succeeded in helping one faction of the bourgeoisie against another faction, and had gained no control over their own lives or society in this struggle. They had allowed themselves to be used and controlled by the "democratic" side, allied with the authoritarian communists. They had agreed to suspend their struggle for revolutionary change and had gained only a brutalization of life, and the strengthening of the state authority in opposition to the self-managed collectives, committees and other organizations of the ordinary people. For a further discussion of this, see *CLASS WAR ON THE HOME FRONT: Revolutionary opposition to the Second World War* by Wildcat Group; Manchester, UK, 1986.

By the late 1930s, many anti-authoritarians, including those around the Freedom Group and a number of other libertarian groups in England and Scotland, and individuals such as Emma Goldman, were even more convinced that anti-Fascist struggles carried out in traditional statist terms in order to satisfy the needs of cooperation with state-oriented groups could only lead to the strengthening of the state, of the worst aspects of nationalism and the capitalist system. They believed that it was necessary to simultaneously struggle against Fascism both domestically and internationally, and to fight for, and in such a way as to bring about, a real transformation of social life in a libertarian direction.

In an article published in May of 1938, Emma Goldman explained one of her major reasons for opposing libertarian cooperation with bourgeois elites fighting against Fascism in any future war. She asserted that Fascism was the product of the brutalized mentality produced by World War One, and there was no reason to expect that a second world war would not produce as ugly or an uglier product. The barbarity of the First World War, as perpetrated by all the states involved, had devastated all social and human values and exterminated all human beings who stood in the way of its goals.

Goldman went on to say, *"Fascism and National-Socialism and all the frightfulness they imply are the direct legacy of the last war. Their thirst for blood, their will to murder, their sadistic trend to the vilest deeds have found their innings in the world carnage. And so have their dupes whom the trenches and the battlefield have twisted out of human semblance. Brutalized and degraded, they have been caught in the blood-drunk obscene orgy of Fascism and National Socialism. For in these ranks alone, millions of war derelicts are finding an outlet for their accumulated hatred and vengeance for the forces that had driven them to the battlefield."*

In a letter to Ben Capes, an American comrade, on November 15, 1938, Goldman asserted that a second world war would certainly bring horrors on the battlefield and to the civil population. It would also generate new hatreds and discontents without solving any of the older social problems of the world's peoples. In later interviews, speeches and writings she continued to assert that the "democratic" states, in order to fight fascism, were adopting methods more and more like the Fascists, and that this process would be intensified by the war.

To a Detroit journalist, on April 27, 1939, Goldman said, *"in a war between modern democracies and the Fascist powers, I do not believe that it makes much difference for the people involved who wins. The only difference is the difference between being shot and being hanged ... Modern democracy is only Fascism in disguise. The liberties of the people are being constantly curtailed. The latest example is conscription in England. And, of course, the present preparation of another imperialistic war. The people always lose in such wars."*

Goldman felt that the only real hope for the majority of people in the world and for a real, decisive defeat of Fascism lay with the people in each country. If they could rise up and fight against their masters, such a war would be justified and moreover, would be the only way of avoiding future horrors and hatreds after another war. Rather than supporting the Allies against the Axis, she stated again and again that she believed that it was important for libertarians to support, and if possible participate in, resistance to authoritarian domination directly and in an uncompromising manner.

On October 7, 1939, after the invasion of Poland by German and Soviet troops and the declarations of war by the British and French governments, Goldman wrote to Herbert Read, *"My attitude in re the war is exactly the same as it was in 1917. I diverted from that stand only on behalf of the Spanish struggle because I believed it was in defense of the revolution. I have never thought that wars imposed on mankind by the powers that be for materialistic designs have or ever can do any good. But that does not mean that I do not stress the need of the extermination of Nazism. It seems to me, however, that must come from within Germany and by the German people themselves. War, whoever will be victorious or vanquished, will only create a form of madness in the world. It is*

*the same about the dictatorship in Russia. Its terrible power will never be broken and eradicated from Russian soil except by the people themselves."*

On November 6, 1939, Goldman wrote to an American friend that she was totally opposed to World War II. *"I do not have to tell you that almost anybody is better than that savage, Hitler. At the same time, there is no instance in the human struggle of the past that should warrant anybody, unless carried away by the war psychosis, to believe that Hitlerism can be abolished by another world conflagration. The last war was also for the purpose of eradicating war and for democracy. The very existence of Hitler, Mussolini and the other dictators should prove to thinking people that wars settle nothing."* For more information on Goldman's position, see David Porter, editor, VISION ON FIRE: F--a Goldman on the Spanish Revolution; Commonground Press, 1983, from which the above quotes are taken.

Some on the left, including anarchists, libertarian socialists and council communists, who had opposed cooperating with any ruling class during World War I argued that the new conditions required new tactics. The workers' movements had been crushed or badly weakened by the Fascist repression, and demoralized by the Stalinist and reformist compromises. It was impossible to tell, they argued, whether the Second World War would last long enough for workers and revolutionaries to develop the capacity to effectively rebel. A rapid victory by the Axis powers could, they argued, destroy social possibilities for many years to come.

For this reason, many libertarians joined the mainstream Resistance movement in France. Some anarchists and anarcho- syndicalists joined with people who had been members of the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party to work on publications in the left wing of the Resistance, including, in Paris, NOTRE REVOLUTION, which later became NOS COMBATS and finally LIBERTES, and in the South of France, the publication L'INSURGE and LIBERER ET FEDERER, which later merged. These publications avoided the chauvinistic language of the Stalinist and Gaullist Resistance literature and continually affirmed their commitment to a libertarian and socialist future after the defeat of Fascism.

Nevertheless, a wide variety of groups and individuals participated in resistance to Vichy and Nazi rule and sabotage of the Nazi war effort without joining the mainstream Resistance. They objected to cooperation with the rightwing bourgeois nationalists, Gaullists, liberal democratic capitalists and Stalinists who dominated it. Despite the possibilities for expressing some working-class revolutionary ideas in some of its publications, the Resistance was organized in hierarchical military fashion and did not allow for as much open debate as many libertarians felt necessary.

Many independent leftists, council communists, anarchists, and even Trotskyists

decided to stay outside the mainstream Resistance so as to continue articulating and acting on their anti-patriotic, internationalist, anti-capitalist positions. They maintained their own organizations and publications, and cooperated with each other as well as with the mainstream Resistance when appropriate. And they continued to call for social revolution as the only real way of doing away with the Fascist danger.

The German and Italian left communists, who had experienced Fascism and Nazism firsthand, maintained their independence, acting through their own groups and with others. Some of them, in cooperation with various other independent left communists, council communists, anarchists and Trotskyists, formed the Revolutionary Proletarian Group-Union of International Communists in France at the end of 1941. The members were of a number of different nationalities, French as well as German, Italian, Spanish and other exiles. Throughout the war they maintained their stance against all capitalists and their criticism of the war as yet another struggle between imperialist state rivals, including the USSR.

In 1943 they issued a manifesto calling upon the workers to transform the imperialist war into civil war against all capitalist governments and calling for an international republic of workers' councils. As immediate steps, they advocated and engaged in fraternization with German soldiers and workers so as to involve them in anti-war and anti-capitalist discussions, support of the economic demands of the workers against exploiters in all the belligerent countries, fighting against the deportation of workers to Germany, and the formation of revolutionary groups in the factories to work toward the organization of self-managed workers' militias and factory committees. A small group of Austrian left communists exiled in the South of France also engaged in these activities, particularly contacting disaffected German soldiers in France. A few thousand German troops were known to have deserted with support from such groups. Hundreds were caught and executed by the Nazi authorities.

Because of their uncompromising refusal to support either side in the conflict and their insistence on expressing criticism of the Allies, including the USSR, many internationalist revolutionaries were in peril from both sides. As in Spain, so in France, many who joined the Stalinist-led maquis disappeared without a trace or died by mysterious means.

Attempts after the war at working-class autonomy were crushed by the victorious state powers, with the help of the Stalinists and the liberal reformers. Information for these closing paragraphs comes from THIRD-CAMP INTERNATIONALISTS IN FRANCE DURING WORLD WAR II, a pamphlet by Ernest Rayner.

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## From SOME NOTES AND INFORMATION ON ANARCHIST OPPOSITION TO WAR

Translations and Summaries by Charlatan Stew

CHARLATAN STEW, Seattle, U.S.A., 1995

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