

Revolutionary Praxis

Notes on International Communist Policy 1935 to 1941

First Published: 2011. Posted on July 21, 2019 Revolutionary Praxis

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A debate and discussion was held between Revolutionary Praxis and Socialist Fight, a Trotskyist organisation. Here are the notes that a RP comrade made in preparation for this occasion.

In 1935 the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern adopted a new international policy; the United Front Against Fascism drafted by Georgi Dimitrov, its General Secretary. It was a defensive policy as a response to the triumph of fascism in Italy, Germany and other countries. It had two main facets:

1. To try to divide the “fascist imperialists”, i.e. Italy, Germany and Japan from the “democratic” imperialists, i.e. Britain, France and the USA so that they would not form a united front to make war on the Soviet Union.
2. Instructing its constituent communist parties, e.g. the Communist Party of Great Britain, in the “democratic” imperialist countries to abandon their revolutionary aims for the time being and to form broadly based alliances, e.g. with social democratic parties, to defend bourgeois democracy.

The Soviet leaders were well aware that sooner or later they would face an attack from imperialist forces. But they were playing for time. The Soviet crash industrialisation drive was still underway. This needed to be sustained to produce sufficient war materials for the Red Army to defeat invading armies.

It is often claimed that the main aim of this policy was defence of the Soviet Union, the only socialist country in the world, and not the advancement of proletarian revolution.

THE PERIOD UP TO THE MUNICH CRISIS

The Soviet Government did have some limited success in concluding mutual defence agreements with bourgeois democratic governments. For example there was a tripartite pact of mutual defence and aid between the French, Czechoslovakian and Soviet governments. If any was attacked by a third party then the other governments would come to their aid.

But the “democratic” imperialists were deeply suspicious of the intentions of the Soviet Union and were reluctant to enter into such agreements. They feared communism more than they did fascism. In 1935 they had failed to oppose the Italian fascist invasion of Abyssinia. What many of the leaders of Britain and France wanted was war between Germany and the Soviet Union of which British and French imperialism would be the beneficiaries. The Soviet leaders were manoeuvring to try to avoid such an eventuality.

Diplomatic negotiations by the Soviet Union with Britain, France and Poland on non-aggression and mutual defence pacts continued through to 1938 when the Munich Crisis arose. Hitler demanded the accession of the German speaking parts of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak Army was mobilised and under the terms of the tripartite pact the Soviet Union sent bombers, at the request of the Czechoslovak Government, to Czechoslovakia even though the French Government refused to honour its commitment in the pact. Elements in the German High Command (OKW) were plotting a putsch if Hitler ordered an attack on Czechoslovakia. They were in secret communication with the British Foreign Office. At the Munich Conference in September 1938 the German, British, French and Italian governments agreed to Hitler’s territorial demands and the Soviet bombers were sent home. The Czechoslovak Government, although it had a well-trained and equipped army, failed to resist the German occupation. By March 1939 Hitler had dismembered the whole country.

It had become clear that the “democratic” imperialists were not prepared to resist German expansionism or form defensive alliances with the Soviet Union. In this respect the United Front Policy Against Fascism had failed.

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

During 1936 a broadly based, reforming Popular Front Government was elected in Spain. Its membership ranged from socialists, liberals through to Republicans, the latter wanting to stabilise the Spanish political system. The Communist Party of Spain (PCE) was not a participant. Given that this political development was also accompanied by workers seizing factories and peasants seizing land, in July 1936 most of the Spanish Army supported by nationalist and fascist groups staged an armed uprising to overthrow the elected government. The rebels were quickly supported by military aid from Germany and Italy. At the same time

the Republican Government had difficulty in purchasing arms abroad because Britain and France pursued a policy of “non-intervention” and in effect mounted an economic blockade of Spain. The defence of the Republic was mainly in the hands of the militia formed by different political groups with little overall coordination. Not surprisingly the nationalist/fascist armies were in the summer and autumn of 1936 making rapid advances into the Republican-held areas.

Only two governments openly supported the Republic; the Soviet and the Mexican. In October 1936 the Soviet Union started to supply arms and other materials to the Republican forces. This enabled the Republic to slow down and more effectively resist the nationalist/fascist advances. The influence of the small Communist Party of Spain rapidly grew because they were effective, disciplined organisers and benefited from having the support of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with their military units getting preference in military supplies from the Soviet Union.

Some of the leftist elements thought that the best way to defeat the fascists was to carry out a thoroughgoing socialist revolution behind the front lines even though a desperate defence against the fascists was in progress. The Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) was one such group. Others, such as the Communists, considered that any such attempt would lead to the collapse of the Republican Government and thus make for an easy victory for the reactionaries. They thought that keeping the Republican regime together was necessary to defeat the insurgents. Only then would it be possible to move forward to socialist revolution. This was the view of the Soviet leaders. Also they did not want to further alienate Britain and France, which the setting up of a socialist regime would do, and thus hinder the Soviet Union’s attempts to form defensive alliances with these “democratic imperialists”.

In May 1937 the POUM and some anarchist elements staged an armed uprising in Barcelona with the aim overthrowing the Republican Government. This was at a time when International Brigade units were being rushed to Madrid to try to stem the fascist advance. This was not supported by most leftist organisations and was quickly put down. Subsequently the different militia were reorganised into one unified Republican Army which was able to slow down the advances of the reactionary forces.

With the encouragement of the Soviet Union, the policy of trying to convince France and Britain that they had nothing to fear from the Republic was carried on. In October 1938 the International Brigades were sent home to try to persuade the British and French governments that they had nothing to fear from the Republic. But the Munich Agreement the previous month had decisively shown that the British and French governments had no stomach for resisting German and Italian fascism. At this point perhaps the Soviet Union should have sent Red Army units into Spain to stem the fascist advance.

What is for sure is that without the military aid from the Soviet Union the Republic would not have lasted as long as did. In other countries fascism had easily triumphed but the Spanish

people showed that it could be resisted and their heroic example encouraged other people around the world to oppose the reactionaries.

THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT

The Soviet Union continued with its policy of trying to form anti-fascist alliances but was repeatedly rebuffed. Finally in August the Soviet leaders decided to try to deflect a Nazi attack on the Soviet Union by signing a non-aggression pact with the Nazi regime. This was a cynical but necessary tactical manoeuvre. It gave the Soviet Union more time to prepare for the coming war and ensured that Hitler would attack the Western imperialists and their allies, e.g. Poland, before turning his attention to the East. It was agreed that in the event of war the existing territory of the Polish state would be divided between Germany and the Soviet Union. In September with the German attack on Poland this happened. In 1921 the Poles had occupied Byelorussia and Western Ukraine and set about colonising them. With the Red Army occupation of these territories they were restored to Soviet rule.

This unexpected development threw the communists into confusion. They did not know how to react. The leaders of the CPGB put forward a policy of supporting a military struggle against Nazi Germany while at the same time demanding a popular government be formed in place of the Chamberlain one. This is not surprising given that they had been encouraged to defend bourgeois democracy in their homeland. Within weeks the Comintern told its constituent parties that the war between Britain, France and Germany was an inter-imperialist one and therefore the working class should be encouraged to oppose it. Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the CPGB, opposed this position and this led to his resignation from his post in the Party. The CPGB did follow the line of opposing the war and as a result the *Daily Worker* was banned. The French Communist Party (PCF) also opposed the war and were seriously persecuted by the French state for doing so.

THE BRITISH COALITION GOVERNMENT

With the route of the French and British armies in France in May to June 1940 the Chamberlain Government fell and a broad-based Coalition Government led by Winston Churchill was formed to carry on with the war. The inter-imperialist character of the war had not altered so the CPGB continued to oppose British participation in the war. Home intelligence reports in Britain showed that many members of the public had little appetite for the war. The same politicians who had led them during the Depression were now making a mess of the war. There was much backhanded admiration for Hitler as a man who could get things done. In the summer of 1940 the attempted German invasion of Britain was beaten off but apart from that Britain continued to suffer defeats at German hands.

BARBAROSSA

In June 1941 Germany and its allies launched a massive attack on the Soviet Union. This changed the character of the war. Now it had an additional dimension of imperialism attacking a socialist country. Given that the Soviet Union formed anti-Nazi alliances with Britain and then the USA, it was correct for the CPGB to support the British war effort. But this was only a tactical matter and in the later stages of the war the fundamentally imperialist character of the Coalition Government became clear, e.g. the British attack on the ELAS resistance movement in Greece. Britain, France and the other European colonialists were aiming to recover the imperial possessions they had lost in the war.

NATIONALISM IN THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT

In Georgi Dimitrov's report to the 7th. Comintern Congress in 1935 he had attacked what he called "national nihilism". Communists were internationalists but according to Dimitrov this did not mean that they did not identify with particular nations, e.g. France, Britain. On the contrary, claimed Dimitrov, they should show themselves to be the most diligent defenders of their own countries against foreign enemies. So in Britain the CPGB attacked the Chamberlain Government on the grounds that it was not defending British interests in the face of Italian and German imperialism. With the commencement of World War Two the British communists did oppose the inter-imperialist war but somewhat uneasily. After the entry of the Soviet Union into World War they could wholeheartedly support the British state's war drive. The same was true of the French communists who although they resisted the German occupation after 1941 supported the restoration of the pre-war French state and actually voted in favour of its efforts to retrieve its colonial possessions, e.g. Indo-China.

In the case of the CPGB their support for British bourgeois democracy led on to them completely abandoning a revolutionary road to socialism and instead they adopted a revisionist programme in 1951, *The British Road to Socialism*, whereby they claimed that socialism could be brought about in Britain by peaceful parliamentary means, i.e. by means of using an imperialist capitalist state. For them, Britain was different.

CONCLUSION

The record of the Comintern and its successors in the period 1935 to 1945 was mixed. It attempted to drive a wedge between the different imperialist powers and it required its constituent parties to make opportunist compromises in support of trying to implement this policy. On the other hand the Soviet Union did manage to survive and defeat the Nazis. The Red Army was the main force in the European war. As Winston Churchill said, "The Red Army tore the guts out of the Nazi war machine".

Harry Powell July 2019