

Old Tavern", Upper Denby, Huddersfield; HD8 8UN
0484 - 001040

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Comrade Ciaran,

Your letter of March 21 only reached me yesterday, and I must take time to send you my suggestions as quickly as I can. I write in some haste, but usefully enough, I hope, to contribute to solving your problem and deepening the discussion.

I expect you know that there were deep, genuine political divergences among the Trotskyists during the war in every country where we had a footing. These have hardly been discussed, despite the profound political questions which they raised, and were, in my opinion, to our own inevitable lack of experienced cadres and the vicissitudes of social-democracy and Stalinism.

There have, of course, been people like Gerry Healy and Ted Grant, who were personally implicated and who, regrettably, have never been able to separate their record from defending their personal prestige. Nor are there many survivors left.

However, in each country the divergences appear not to have been about completely different things, though, of course, the specific forms of the argument tended to be dictated in different places by their own national circumstances.

The whole discussion was, of course, dominated by the problem of applying the ideas contained in the two basic documents, Trotsky's 1934 thesis "War and the Fourth International" and his resolution, "Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution", passed by the Emergency Conference of the Fourth International in New York in May 1940, just when the German imperialist forces were over-running continental Europe in the West.

In Britain we not as badly isolated as comrades elsewhere, because we not only got publications from the SWP but were soon also getting visits from the seamen. However, there was a difference in autumn 1939, just after the war broke out between the RSL, at that time the recognised section of the FI in Britain, and the WIL, which had come into existence at the end of 1937 as a result of a split which I do not understand to this day. Fortunately, Richardson is publishing an article by me in a forthcoming issue of "Revolutionary History" about this.

We were also influenced by the political tone of James P. Cannon's courageous defence of the position of the SWP in the Minneapolis Trial, and it has to be said that he came in for some political criticism for what seemed to some to be "opportunism", while others nailed their colours to the mast of the so-called "Military Policy of the Proletariat".

My opinion, formed after the events is that we were all wrestling with finding out how to combine our international duty of defeating the fascist regimes of Hitler and Mussolini and of defending the Soviet Union against imperialist attack as well as the false policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy, while at the same time the working class maintained its complete political independence from involvement in the imperialist aims of the Anglo-American "democratic" powers.

The SWP had, of course, great prestige in our eyes, and there was a tendency to idealise it as a direct link not only with the class struggle but with Trotsky and the International Left Opposition. It came as rather a shock to discover in 1944 that Jan van Heijenoort, formerly one of Trotsky's secretaries for seven years, who was in charge of the international work for the I.S. in New York, had a deeply different view of the whole perspective of the revolution in Europe from the official view of the SWP!

You and I have both been involved in what are largely pioneering studies. We have lacked what is very necessary, which is the chance of joint work and a constant exchange of ideas and information with a group of people in the same general field. This objective necessity, which we cannot help, is an element in our work.

Under these conditions, which are forced upon us and no fault of ours, in which there are very few people from whom we can "bounce off" ideas, it is more than usually our duty to avoid premature judgements and taking sides before we have been very, very careful. Judgements come at the end, not at the beginning or half way through. We are as yet nowhere near the end. It is an act of self-discipline to recognise that we are not so brilliant today at solving our problems to be entitled to allot praise or blame to other people's politics without great circumspection.

In my work on "Trotskyism in Britain: 1931 - 1937", I did my best to record faithfully who did what, or said or wrote what, when, where and, if possible from the evidence, what their purpose was. My own participation is only mentioned once and then without naming me! I do not take sides in the debates, but try to avoid sparing my reader the painful duty of thinking but seeing to it that all sides get a fair crack of the whip.

This has one advantage, that it presents Trotskyists as real human beings, whose whole lives are centred on the struggle to find the best location in the class-war. Lenin never allowed himself to be pictured as a "super-man", and we have no infallible leaders either.

So we have to avoid confusing what might or might not be true, which sounds O.K. but is not carefully checked, with definite, final assertions. One of the worst culprits in this is Rob Sewell, whose unfortunate efforts to present history pollute the pages of "Socialist Appeal". He can recite with ineffable self-satisfaction statements that people have made to him, without any sign of critical evaluation or reference to evidence.

However, let us be grateful where gratitude is due. In the last issue of "Socialist Appeal" he tells us what he thinks was done by the Trotskyists during the war in Britain. It is obvious that he has simply repeated the "oral tradition" laid down by Ted Grant and passed down the generations. But what is most revealing is that he states, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that the "line" of the Trotskyists, by whom he means the W.I.L., because he doesn't recognise that the RSL existed or mention the fusion of 1944, was "to turn the imperialist war into an anti-fascist war". Now is that, or is it not, the same thing as "turn the imperialist war into a civil war", and how does it differ, if at all, from the position of "Tribune" and the "left" social-patriots who supported the war?

It is not as if there were no material for him to investigate. There exists a large archive, which may not contain every document, but still quite enough, from all the different tendencies involved. It is sad to say that, so far, only one student to my knowledge, has seriously studied it. A masculine Geraldine indeed!

But there is another reason, too, for my saying that hypotheses are necessary, but they must not be allowed to promote themselves to the level of statements of fact. The documents reveal that the leading comrades of the W.I.L. - with the very best of intentions, in the light of the training they had had in the CP and the YCL in the "Third Period and later", tried to defend themselves in such a way as created confusion, by quite astonishing slander of the RSL!

It is my own opinion - and I make no more claim than that for it - that the W.I.L. never was quite clear about the war (it was agitating in the early part of the war against the "threat of Petainism", a view which I thought not to be relevant to the attitude towards the war of Churchill and the British bourgeoisie). Nor did I agree with what Ted Grant said about the Labour Party in "Preparing for Power" about advanced layers of the workers "by-passing" the Labour Party at that time, a view which he was to reverse 100% in the later 50's. I regret very much that it has not been possible to investigate these controversies subsequently.

It would seem, then, that you would naturally acknowledge the help, as well as the energy and the devotion, of the comrades of the W.I.L. That does not mean for a moment that you have to pass on their political conceptions as established truth. Indeed, only

when you reserve judgement, can you begin to think about the problems of the Irish comrades in such a way that you can hope to probe their difficulties in political rather than purely personal terms. Only in this way can your foundation work, on the very fringes of knowledge, come to have its full value, to the extent that it enables us to understand how to probe their political difficulties, such as:

- (i) What level could the Irish comrades reach in discussing how the working class in Ireland could maintain its independence of both imperialist blocs without being taken in tow by De Valera?
- (ii) What should have been the status of the Irish comrades? Should they have been regarded as members of the W.I.L.? Did an Irish section of the F.I. ever exist in any real sense? I do not remember that there was an Irish representative at the Founding Congress of the RCP in spring 1944, where the RSL and the WIL fused. Nor do I remember from when I was a member of the central committee of the RCP from 1944 to 1946 that anything about Ireland was ever mentioned.
- (iii) How do we explain politically the trajectory of Bob Armstrong? He was my first contact with Ireland since 1937, and I met him in Paris at the pre-conference of the European sections of the F.I. By that time, he was announcing himself as not accepting L.T.'s analysis of the class nature of the USSR and of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and that he supported Shachtman. You will recall that the conference was disrupted early on by the police and I had no chance to discuss with him how he had been led to this conclusion because I didn't know how to, and I just concluded that perhaps he and Elsie, having had to put up with a lot during the war, and seeing little enough to have come out of it, simply were finding what could be a way out. It is a pity that the minutes and other records of the International Secretariat during the war appear to be all lost. Anyway, the file ends with Trotsky's assassination, and they tell me in New York that no one knows what happened to them when, at the end of the war, the I.S. was moved back to Paris.

I am up against a dead-line on another job, and have not had time (to my regret) to go through your draft again, so this letter has had to be written from memory. Perhaps things will ease up a bit, but anyway it gives me great satisfaction to be able to share the task of pitting our wits against ignorance and falsehood. I can well sympathise with your wanting to get the job off your back and into print.

Best wishes to Geraldine, with whom I hope all goes well, for when she comes back into active service.

All the best to yourself,

John