

Stalinism and Trotskyism in Occupied France

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The following letter was sent by a French reader, in response to Richard Phillips' August 16 review of Marcel Ophuls' documentary, The Sorrow and the Pity: Chronicle of a French City Under Occupation. The four-and-a-half-hour epic was first shown three decades ago and has recently been released on DVD. It depicts the German occupation of France during World War II and exposes the collaboration of the French ruling class with the Nazis between 1940 and 1944.

Richard Phillips' review incited me to see again my video of Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*.

The fight against Pétain's Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Nazi invaders in destroying all the democratic rights of the working class as well as facilitating the extermination of the Jews, was a continuation of the class struggle that had developed throughout the French Third Republic. Indeed, the Pétain counter-revolution, the "National Revolution", was the backlash of the most reactionary forces in French society against the social gains and rights won over decades of struggle. These forces included the anti-Semites, monarchists, authoritarian Catholic moralists, empire builders and slave drivers, as well as those from big business like l'Oréal, still alive and well today in the Fifth Republic.

Pétain's regime represented not, as de Gaulle claimed, a break in French history, but was in direct continuity with it. The direct proof of this is the state apparatus, which has functioned perfectly well without being broken up, from the Third Republic, through Vichy and the Occupation, the Fourth and Fifth Republics to the present day. René Bousquet, Pétain's police chief and organiser of the mass round up and deportation of Parisian Jews to extermination camps, lived well after the liberation of France. As Paris police chief, Maurice Papon—loyal state functionary and organiser of the deportation of Jewish children and families—went on to organise the massacre of hundreds of unarmed and peaceful pro-independence Algerian demonstrators in 1961.

François Mitterand himself is the best example of this continuity, having been decorated by Pétain for his services to *l'Etat Français*, then serving as a minister during the Algerian war and presiding over the French army's regime of torture and terror, only to become French President, as leader of the Socialist Party. It is no accident that he was the most energetic defender of the parenthesis version of French wartime history.

Pétain called his senile bonapartist regime *l'Etat Français*, the French state, but many symbols of the French Republic were retained on official documents and the civil functionaries, army officers and police of the Third Republic served their new masters well, whether of the French or the German variety.

The differences between de Gaulle and Pétain, who both hailed from the same military officer caste, were tactical rather than strategic. They both sought to defend capitalist rule, the French colonial empire and the elaborate state apparatus that maintained them and which kept the exploited and oppressed in their place. De Gaulle's prickly relationship with Britain and America attests to the fact that even those major powers that were considered to be France's allies, were also regarded as deadly rivals in the drive to obtain the lion's share of the world's resources, and they were not averse to stealing colonies from each other.

The Stalinists of the French Communist Party (PCF), as is well pointed

out in Phillips' review, played a criminal role in disarming the working class in the struggle against Nazism. In 1935, premier Pierre Laval, later to become the main architect of Pétain's collaborationist regime, signed a pact with Stalin against Hitler's military threat. Until Hitler reneged on his pact with Stalin in 1939, the PCF, together with the social democrats, gave full support to the war preparations of French imperialism. It was at this time that the Stalinists took to singing the "Marseillaise," the bourgeois anthem, alongside the "Internationale" at its functions. In a truncated interview in Ophuls' film, Jacques Duclos, leader of the PCF underground during the Occupation, explains that Pétain's initial popularity after France's military collapse in 1940 was due to his status as a venerable old man willing to "give himself body and soul for France". Also, Georges Bidault, former chairman of the National Council of the Resistance, opines "the French like a peaceful regime, even an authoritarian one." Nowhere is the true reason given: the nationalist response to German rearmament by the social democrats and the Stalinists, and their lack of a working class attitude to Pétain, that old servant of French imperialism and upholder of the most conservative forces and outlooks of the French Republic.

There is a fascinating moment in an interview with the Grave brothers, peasant Resistance fighters, when one of them says: "We used to sing the Internationale, though we're not communists, only Pétain sang the Marseillaise so we had to sing the Internationale."

Not only is the myth of de Gaulle's pre-eminent role in the Resistance undermined by the film, but the extreme rightwing nature of some of its components is brought out by the interview with Resistance member, retired colonel du Jonchay, who admitted that he was an anti-republican monarchist.

I think the weaknesses of the film are best brought out by considering the remarkable fight of the Trotskyists in wartime France. Only they fought for a perspective that did not tie the French working class and peasants to the national bourgeoisie. The Trotskyists rejected a purely military opposition to the Occupation, which could only be nationalist, and therefore played into the hands of de Gaulle's drive to ensure that the "Libération" would keep the state intact and the workers, peasants and colonial peoples in their place. The Trotskyists insisted that outside the perspective of the proletarian revolution, there was only class collaboration. They fought for the defeat of their national bourgeoisie and fraternised with the soldiers of the occupying army, advocating a perspective of socialist revolution coming from the collapse of the Nazi regime and that of the collaborators. Though hunted down and murdered by the Gestapo, the Stalinists and the French national police, the Trotskyists built cells and led struggles in the factories and among the German soldiers. As well as producing high quality publications in French, they collaborated in the production and distribution of German language papers that were circulated amongst the troops.

They worked to expose the National Council of the Resistance, set up on May 15, 1943, and made up of Stalinists, socialist democrats, Gaullists and extreme right-wingers, which they denounced for having as its aim the reconstruction of the bourgeois state and the preservation of the private ownership of big business. As Stalinist leader Thorez put it in January 1945: "One state, one army, one police force."

A document of September 1939 issued by the French Trotskyists declared: "It is by taking over the factories, collectivising the wealth for the benefit of all workers that they will have a country of their own and so something to defend. Before this, nothing! Under the present regime the country they are calling on you to die for is that of your class enemies... Hitler and German militarism must be brought down. Yes, it's true, but French fascism and French militarism must also be brought down, and to bring down Hitler you cannot ask his friend French militarism to do the job."

Another document of the time states: "Defeatism is the class struggle which we conduct everywhere in the war. We must express the demands of the exploited at the front or within the country with the aim of fraternisation."

Again in November 1940: "The slogan of the proletariat remains 'Down with the French bourgeoisie! Down with Hitler fascism! Unity of the French and German working classes against the common oppressor.'"

This was to remain their position, based on the principles expressed in the manifesto adopted by the Emergency Conference of the Fourth International (FI) in May 1940, the opening remarks of which contain this paragraph: "The Fourth International turns not to the governments who have dragooned the peoples into the slaughter, nor to the bourgeois politicians who bear the responsibility for these governments nor to the labour bureaucracy which supports the warring bourgeoisie. The Fourth International turns to the workingmen and women, the soldiers and sailors, the ruined peasants and the enslaved colonial peoples. The Fourth International has no ties whatsoever with the oppressors, the exploiters, the imperialists. It is the world party of the toilers, the oppressed, and the exploited. This manifesto is addressed to them."

The most outstanding example of revolutionary fraternisation was during the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, in the lessons of which the young French Trotskyists were steeped. Russian army detachments sent by the Kerensky government to crush the revolutionary workers of Petrograd were met by Bolshevik agitators who fraternised with the soldiers, appealing to their class solidarity; either neutralising them by persuading them to refuse to attack their brother workers or winning them over to the revolution against the aristocratic and bourgeois officer corps. Revolutionary agitation was also used with some success during the wars of intervention by the capitalist powers against the young Soviet state.

The French Trotskyists based themselves on the profound conviction that the conditions and experiences of the war would enable the German workers and peasants, now in uniform, to overcome the Nazis' chauvinist ideology and recognise that their common class interests crossed national boundaries. It was their unbreakable principle that the ranks of the occupying army should be seen as potential comrades-in-arms in the struggle against French and German imperialism, as were the ranks of the Allied armies against their own imperialist masters, the United States and the British Empire. It was upon this internationalist bedrock that the forces of the Fourth International were built in France and Europe, even in the darkest days of Nazi oppression.

The May 1940 *Manifesto of the Fourth International On the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution* laid the programmatic and methodological framework for the work of the Trotskyists during the Second World War: "Contrary to official fables designed to drug the people, the chief cause of the war as well as of all other social evils—unemployment, the high cost of living, fascism, colonial oppression—is the private ownership of the means of production together with the bourgeois state which rests on this foundation..."

"The real struggle against war means the class struggle against imperialism and a merciless exposure of petty bourgeois pacifism. Only revolution could prevent the American bourgeoisie from entering into this war or beginning the third imperialist war. All other methods are either charlatanism or stupidity or a combination of both..."

"But isn't the working class obliged in the present conditions to aid the democracies in their struggle against German fascism?" That is how the question is put by broad petty-bourgeois circles for whom the proletariat remains only an auxiliary tool of this or that faction of the bourgeoisie. We reject this policy with indignation..."

"By helping their bourgeoisie against foreign fascism the workers would only accelerate the victory of fascism in their own country. The task which is posed by history is not to support one part of the imperialist system against another but to make an end of the system as a whole..."

"In contradistinction to the Second and Third Internationals, the Fourth International builds its policy not on the military fortunes of the capitalist states but on the transformation of the imperialist war into a war of the workers against the capitalists, on the overthrow of the ruling classes of all countries, on the world socialist revolution... we propagate the unity of the workers in all warring and neutral countries; we call for the fraternisation of workers and soldiers within each country, and of soldiers with soldiers on the opposite side of the battle front; we mobilise the women and the youth against the war; we carry on constant, persistent, tireless preparation of the revolution—in the factories, in the mills, in the villages, in the barracks, at the front and in the fleet..."

Despite theoretical and organisational difficulties, different French Trotskyist groups were unified and were an essential component of the European Conference of the Fourth International held in occupied France in February 1944. Enriched by four years of struggle against Stalinist and bourgeois (Gaullist) opposition to the Nazi occupation and Pétainist collaboration, the 1944 conference provided a guide to the advanced workers for achieving an outcome to the war favourable to the working class. It drew extensively for its prognosis and tactics on the experience of the Allied invasion of southern Italy and their hostility to the mass working class uprisings against fascism (the Allies had firebombed workers' districts in towns where they were in anti-fascist insurrection, a practice the US airforce later repeated against the May 1944 Marseilles general strike), the massive working class resistance to the Nazi invasion of the industrial north. The fall of Mussolini at the end of July 1943 sparked an anti-fascist insurrection which was misdirected by the antifascist committees of opposition made up of Stalinists and Christian-Democrats with calls for the new Italy to join the Allies.

The Trotskyists worked to turn the fall of fascism and Nazism into an opportunity for the socialist liberation of Europe. They expected the German working class to play a key role in the European socialist revolution. "The German revolution remains the backbone of the European revolution", declared the *Theses of the 1944 European Conference of the Fourth International*. Before it had been smashed by the Nazis, due to the betrayals of the social democrats and the Stalinists, the German working class had been the most cultured, politically advanced and socialist-minded working class in the world. The Fourth International would work to "develop as much as possible the practice of fraternisation with German, British and American soldiers, by turning the movement into a revolutionary movement, the only way of winning over the German workers in uniform..."

The following excerpt from the Fourth International's resolution of March 1944 encapsulate their approach: "The most tenacious propaganda for the fraternisation between German workers in uniform and British and American working class soldiers against all forms of chauvinism will combine, from the start of the German revolution, with a vast movement of coordination between councils of German soldiers and workers committees... In no case and under no pretext should the sections of the FI participate in 'Popular Fronts', local commissions, economic councils, socialisation commissions alongside members of the bourgeoisie or representatives of a coalition government even if they are exclusively workers..."

In another conference resolution the FI warned against nationalism:

“We must denounce as crude and deceptive the slogan of the “national insurrection” designed in fact to cover up for the transmission from the administration of one military-police apparatus to another such.

“The task of the FI is not to try to be ‘tricky’ with bourgeois slogans but to advance its own programme, that of the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war.”

They counterposed the concept of a workers’ United Front to the Popular Front or National Front and turned their attention to the factories and “into the resistance, with the aim of organizing the latent revolutionary forces there on a class political and organisational basis.”

Compare these statements of internationalist principle with the despicable, racist slogan of the French Communist Party paper, *l’Humanité*, in July 1945: *A chaque Parisien son boche*—Let every Parisian get himself a *boche* (racist term for a German).

There is, in the Ophuls film, a confused discussion in the Grave Resistance group where they wonder whether it was right to consider all German soldiers as Nazis. The argument finishes when one says that all the communists were in the concentration camps, so the ones which came to France must have been Nazis.

German military reverses and privation at home, and the massive imposition of the *Service de Travail Obligatoire* (STO), compulsory work in Germany for French workers, radicalised the working class in both countries. The Trotskyists worked to help the German working class to overcome the defeat represented by Hitler’s accession to power in 1933, to restore confidence to revolutionaries within the *Wehrmacht* (army), helping them to organise revolutionary propaganda in the army and inside Germany itself. It was necessary, therefore, to break through the national antagonisms cultivated by the various imperialist powers, and fight for the solidarity of the oppressed peoples with the German working class against Nazism. Issue 4 of *La Vérité*, published on October 15, 1940, declared: “We are the friends of the German people—That is why we fight Hitlerism.” The French Trotskyist paper again affirms in January 1942: “At the very moment when the Hitler regime is reeling, at the moment when the time is ripe to spread throughout Europe, the slogan of working class fraternisation, for the socialist liberation of Europe and the world, this is when the Communist Party chooses to launch the stupid and despicable slogan ‘All together against the ‘boche’.”

In 1941, German Trotskyist Martin Monat, known as Widelin or Victor, having just been elected to the central committee of the Belgian section at the age of 28, was sent to Paris with the job of reorganising the German Trotskyists and doing systematic work in the *Wehrmacht*. From 1942, with German soldiers and a French “triangle”, a three-member cell, they published a dozen issues of *Arbeiter und Soldat* (*Worker and Soldier*) over more than a year.

In an interview published in Yves Craipeau’s book *Contre vents et marées*, Roland Filiâtre, an electrical worker who, under the pseudonym Dupont, was responsible for this work, explains how they proceeded: “The French comrades got into discussion with German soldiers, got them talking and giving details of their past. When they seemed trustworthy they were put in touch, after screening, with the German soldiers and then taken care of by their organisation. The Paris region was organised in two zones. The main part of the organisation was in Brittany, round Nantes and especially round Brest where the soldiers provided the Party with *Ausweis* (identity papers) and weapons. In Brest the organisation had about fifty soldiers [others say about 15] despite postings away. Contacts were begun or established in Toulon, Valence, La Rochelle and at Conches aerodrome. There was also an organization in Belgium. Links were established with the Trotskyist organisation in the port of Hamburg, in Lübeck and in Rostock. Victor was responsible for these contacts. *Arbeiter und Soldat* was also distributed in the Italian garrisons.”

From May 1943, *La Vérité*, published regularly throughout the Occupation, was the only paper to reveal that thousands of Germans were

in the Auschwitz concentration camp and that many had been there since 1933. Neither the Stalinists nor the Allies gave any information about the Nazi terror against the German working class. “To recognise the presence of hundreds of thousands of Germans, communists, Stalinists, Trotskyists, Social-Democrats, Jews, gypsies is already to disprove the responsibility of the German people for the crimes of Nazism.” (Jean-Pierre Cassard)

The German army presence in Brittany, and particularly in Brest, a naval port, submarine base and arsenal, plus its combative working class, provided the Trotskyist cadre led by Robert Grau, a postal worker and German speaker, the necessary conditions for fraternisation. Taking incredible risks in discussions with German soldiers, Grau established a group loyal to the Fourth International. By the summer of 1943 the first soldiers recruited were publishing *Zeitung für Soldat und Arbeiter im Westen* (*Paper for Soldiers and Workers in the West*), bearing the banner of the Fourth International. It carried stories of privation and discontent in Germany and in the German armed forces.

In October 1943, the Gestapo were tipped off and none of the FI’s German supporters in Brest were heard of again. Many of the French Trotskyists died either at the hands of the Gestapo or, if they got to the concentration camps, at the hands of the Stalinists. At the Compiègne camp Marcel Beaufrère addressed his comrades: “We are going to be deported to Buchenwald. Before leaving I want to make this declaration: we are going to meet up with German revolutionaries and make the revolution with them.”

They went on to set up the Buchenwald Trotskyist cell, whose April 1944 declaration is reproduced in J-P Cassard’s book and whose last point was: “Revolutionary fraternisation with the workers in the Armies of occupation. For a Germany of workers’ councils in a Europe of councils! For the world workers’ revolution!”

No work of history is just about the past; it is also, and often primarily, an intervention into contemporary politics. The *Sorrow and the Pity* does not escape this law. It has sometimes facetiously been seen as part of the iconoclasm of the *soixante-huitard* generation of student rebels thrown up by the events of May/June 1968. It is true that it demolishes the Gaullist myth that only a few “black sheep” collaborated with the Nazis, when in fact virtually the entire state and political caste and the Church rallied to Pétain’s dictatorship. But, in failing to question the myths of the French Communist Party, the film does Stalinism a great service and thus cannot make a truthful accounting with de Gaulle. While the film was being made, the French bourgeoisie was recovering from one of the greatest threats to its existence in history: the ten-million-strong, six-week strike and factory occupations of 1968, from which it had been saved by the Stalinists, who preserved de Gaulle’s government by depoliticising and selling out the strike for a few transitory concessions.

As in 1945, so in 1968 the Communist Party was a pillar of the capitalist order. This was the beginning of the terminal decline of the PCF. Order had been restored with the strenuous efforts of the Stalinists, but de Gaulle, Gaullism, and Stalinism had been severely shaken. The Stalinists’ reputation as defenders of the working class had been profoundly undermined; the crushing of the Prague Spring, the Czech workers’ uprising against the Stalinist dictatorship, by Soviet tanks, at that same time, further adding to their discrediting.

Ophuls’ film, which emphasises the role of the Communist Party in the Resistance and which makes no reference to any contemporary events, was a balm to the wounded reputation of the PCF. It would be interesting to see the reviews of the film by the different political parties and tendencies of the time, to ascertain more clearly the significance of its impact in 1971 when it was made available to the public. We do, however, have the reactions of the Communist Party press: “By the exceptional quality of its presentation. By the power of its impact, its caustic lucidity: it gets you in the stomach, in the heart, in the memory.” (*Les Lettres Françaises*, 21 April 1971)

“A political act, not depressing, but purifying.” *l’Humanité*,
September 1971)

De Gaulle only secured the continuity of the French state with the help of the Stalinists and the social democrats. So we can say that, although *The Sorrow and the Pity* partially undermined de Gaulle’s myth, in leaving the loyal opposition, Stalinists and the social democrats untouched or even enhanced, it covered up not only for the counter-revolutionary policies they had adopted prior to and during the war, but also bolstered their position in the 1970s.

Sources

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Richard Phillips’ review, *Collaboration and resistance in Vichy France*
can be found at:
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/aug2001/sff3-a16.shtml>



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