

European Trotskyists mark seventieth anniversary of World War II

Our reporter
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On October 11 in London, the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International held a joint meeting on the lessons of the Second World War.

The event was jointly convened by the Socialist Equality Parties of Britain and Germany, with the participation of the supporters of the ICFI in France. Its chair, SEP National Secretary Chris Marsden, noted the extraordinary significance of a gathering of European Trotskyists for a continent rent asunder by all-out war twice in the last century.

Addressing the audience, Marsden said, “You have come here not out of general interest, but out of political concern—a recognition that we are dealing here with issues of more than merely historical curiosity. We are here to discuss a fundamental question of revolutionary perspective for the modern era—the elaboration of a revolutionary perspective against war.

“Our tendency is seeking to find a way to the most advanced representatives of the working class, particularly its youth. Our task as a party is to educate and organize that vanguard—as the historical memory of the class, as its strategic command in the struggle against capital and its political defenders.”

Barbara Slaughter of the British SEP addressed the meeting first. Slaughter is the longest-standing member of the Trotskyist movement and a central committee member of the party. Twelve years old at the start of WWII, Slaughter described the war’s impact on a youth at once drawn toward socialism but blocked from a revolutionary perspective by the influence of Stalinism on her and her parents’ generation.

She explained, “I joined the Communist Party in 1945 at the age of 18, because I identified the party with the heroism of the Russian working class during the war and because I was under the mistaken impression that it was a revolutionary party. I was determined, like millions of others, that there would be no return to the pre-war sufferings of the working class that I had witnessed...

“It did not take me very long to realise that the Communist Party was far from being a revolutionary party. But I could see no

alternative. It was not until I joined the Trotskyist movement in 1958, after the Hungarian Revolution of ‘56, that I understood the meaning of all the experiences that I and millions of workers had endured, before, during and after the Second World War.”

Slaughter, whose mother was from Spain, discussed the significance of Stalinism’s betrayal of the Spanish revolution and the disorientation produced by the Soviet bureaucracy’s portrayal of WWII as the “Great Patriotic War” against Germany. She also outlined British imperialism’s crimes against the German working class during the war, which are either ignored or celebrated by Britain’s ruling elite today.

Françoise Thull spoke of the experience of French workers under the Nazi occupation and the collaborationist regime of Marshall Philippe Pétain. She too focused on the role of the Communist Party in disarming the working class through the class-collaborationist Popular Front policies that headed off a revolutionary confrontation with the ruling class during the 1936 general strike.

Thull’s family came from the Sarre, the border area that was alternately ruled by French and German imperialism. After the takeover of the region by Hitler following the 1935 Sarre plebiscite, her socialist grandparents and their eldest son were deported to France. Her father served in the French army and took part in the fight against the Wehrmacht until the Pétain regime was established. Her uncle was forced to serve in the German army on the Russian Front. He never returned.

The French bourgeoisie collaborated in the deportation and extermination of French Jews, leftists, gypsies, homosexuals and others, Thull explained. After the war and “under conditions where the vast majority of the French bourgeoisie was thoroughly discredited” the Stalinists “suppressed any independent movement by the working class. This meant brutally repressing the very active Trotskyist forces in France. The Communist Party fought for the restoration of a bourgeois state—that is, the maintaining of the profit economy on the backs of the working class.”

Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the ICFI and a leader of the German SEP, explained to the audience Trotsky’s analysis of Hitler’s rise to power.

Fascism grew out of the German bourgeoisie's strivings to become a European and global power. But this in turn demanded the destruction of the powerful socialist workers' movement. "Hitler's anti-Semitism stood in close relationship with his hatred of the socialist movement," Schwarz explained. That is why the Nazi party won the support of the ruling class.

Hitler was only able to assume power because of the "complete failure of the large workers' parties," the Social Democrats (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD).

The SPD opposed revolutionary struggle against fascism. It instead presented itself as the defender of the German state apparatus, which it claimed was the only safeguard against Hitler.

The trade union bureaucracy went further still, disassociating itself from the SPD three and a half months before Hitler's seizure of power and pledging its loyalty to the Nazi regime, declaring it would "place the experience and knowledge [it has] gained at the disposal of the government and parliament."

The KPD, under the tutelage of Stalin and the Comintern, denounced the SPD as "social fascists" and rejected a combined struggle against the fascist danger. "Trotsky fought untiringly for the policy of the united front," Schwarz said. "This would have made it possible for the KPD to use the contradiction between social democracy and fascism to unite the working class, win the confidence of the social democratic workers and expose the social democratic leaders."

"The refusal of the KPD to accept such a policy led to the German catastrophe," he said. It was the refusal of the parties of the Communist International to even acknowledge this colossal defeat that led Trotsky to call for the founding of a new, Fourth International.

Julie Hyland, a member of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS and a leading member of the SEP in Britain, concluded the meeting with an exposition of how WWII arose from the struggle among rival imperialist powers for global hegemony, and in particular for the domination of the Eurasian land-mass.

She noted that the first modern "Eurasian strategy" for world domination was elaborated in Britain by imperial strategist Halford Mackinder in his 1904 paper, "The Geographical Pivot of History." Describing the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, as a "world island," Mackinder insisted that "Who rules east Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the world-island; who rules the world-island commands the world."

Interest in Mackinder's analysis is undergoing a revival precisely because a similar struggle for control of the "world island" and its resources is again underway, Hyland explained, as is manifest in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and the growing

threats against Iran. "As the ICFI has insisted, a renewed scramble to re-divide the world is underway," she said. "And despite the passage of some 60 years or so it does so almost as a continuum, although at a far sharper level, of that which characterised the first half of the 20th century."

The renewed struggle "for control of raw materials and resources has an objective logic," Hyland said. "Up until this point in time, concern at American unilateralism has largely dictated the response of the European bourgeoisie." But this was changing, with antagonisms between all the major powers deepening.

"At the centre of the battle for global supremacy is a massive assault on working class living standards and democratic rights," she added, an offensive that must deepen with the worsening of the global economic crisis.

Today, "For the first time in history, more than one billion people, or nearly one in every 6 inhabitants of the planet, are going hungry... In the advanced countries, far from these bail-outs saving jobs, unemployment is rising everywhere and being used to drive down wages, and overturn working conditions. The truth, as Martin Wolf put it so succinctly in the *Financial Times* on October 8, is that 'The crisis is a golden opportunity to impose discipline and make reforms'," Hyland said.

"Trade and military war presupposes a major social realignment and the increased militarization of domestic life in every country," Hyland explained. That is why opposition to the danger of war and the devastation of the social position of the working class must be pursued as a struggle against the capitalist economic order and the nation state system on which it is based, she concluded.

The audience responded enthusiastically to the meeting, with a number of contributions made from the floor. A collection raised over £2,700. The *World Socialist Web Site* will be publishing a number of the speeches made to the meeting.



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