

European Trotskyists mark 70th anniversary of World War II

A battle for empire rooted in profound contradictions of capitalism

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On October 11 in London, the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International held a 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. We will be publishing several of the speeches made to that meeting, beginning with the contribution by WWSW Editorial Board member Julie Hyland.

The horrors of the Second World War were such that they brought forth a new term, genocide. Yet 70 years on, such commemorations that have been held to mark this catastrophic experience have been either low key, or non-existent. The gathering of 20-or-so heads of state in Poland on September 1 attracted barely a mention, aside from the spat between Russian and Polish representatives.

There was no official commemoration in Britain, which is remarkable given that generations of school children are raised on how this was its “finest hour”.

I could find no record of Prime Minister Gordon Brown marking the anniversary. The only reference made by Brown was in a speech on September 4 in which he spoke of the “overwhelming sense of awe and humility at the scale of achievements and the record of service and sacrifice”—a tribute belied by the fact that it occupied just three lines in his remarks.

Someone who did comment on the anniversary was right-wing British historian Niall Ferguson. A fervent defender of the virtues of the British Empire and a supporter of the 2003 Iraq invasion, in his book *Colossus* on the American imperial experience Ferguson portrays empire as the antidote to anarchy and barbarism. His criticism of the US under the Bush administration was whether it was prepared to devote the necessary resources to conducting this strategy effectively, and especially whether it was prepared to carry through the necessary changes at home.

The main point of the *Guardian* article of September 5 was that traditional explanations for the Second World War were too parochial and euro-centric.

To back this up, Ferguson pointed out that the German invasion of Poland did not bring an end to 20 years of peace, as is generally depicted. There had scarcely been a year without serious violence in some corner of the world, after World War I ended in 1918. This has led some to present the first part of the 20th century, between 1914 and 1945, “an almost continuous European civil war,” he wrote.

“Even this conception does not quite suffice,” he continued. “For the world historian, it makes more sense to conceive of the period from 1904”, the date of the Russian-Japanese war over Manchuria, “until 1953

as something more like a 50 years’ war.”

This was because the “leitmotif” of this period “was conflict between and against the western empires over the central question of who should rule the great Eurasian landmass,” an area with such wealth of land and raw materials that control over it would determine the contest for domination of the world.

It was in this context that one should evaluate Hitler’s policy of *Lebensraum*—of a contiguous land area stretching as far as the Volga—as well as Japan’s assault on eastern China and Asia. This was an effort by two aspiring powers to wrest this strategic region from British, French, Russian and American control.

Ferguson’s identifying the centrality of Eurasia in the Second World War is not new. It was the major preoccupation of the period.

The first modern “Eurasian strategy” for world domination had been elaborated, not surprisingly, in Britain by imperial strategist Halford Mackinder. His paper, presented not coincidentally in 1904, to the Royal Geographical Society was entitled “The Geographical Pivot of History”.

In it he defined the Eurasian land mass, comprising the interlinked continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, as a “world island”, the heartland of which stretched from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic.

Mackinder’s concern was that developments in technology, particularly transportation, had opened up the Eurasian land mass and its tremendous resources for penetration by Germany or Russia, threatening the British Empire.

“Who rules east Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the world-island; who rules the world-island commands the world,” he warned.

Mackinder’s strategy would later come in for criticism, but at the time it was followed closely by leading statesmen. Amongst those reportedly convinced by his appraisal was one Rudolf Hess who was said to have introduced them to Hitler.

Imperialism

Ferguson is an opponent of Marxism. And while he complains at traditional depictions of the Second World War and rejects that it had its roots in either ideology or economic depression, he is similarly unable to explain the deeper driving factors behind its eruption.

In truth, the battle for Empire was intimately bound up with the profound contradictions of capitalist profit system.

Analysing the First World War, Lenin had defined the development of

imperialism as one in which finance capital and gigantic capitalist monopolies dominated the globe. Entailing “reaction all down the line”, it had “grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the people of the world by a handful of ‘advanced’ countries,” each struggling to establish its dominance over territory, sources of raw materials and “spheres of influence.”

Through means of war, the respective bourgeois powers sought to overcome the contradiction between the development of a highly integrated world economy and the outmoded nation state system, based on private ownership of the means of production, by establishing their global pre-eminence over all others.

The working class could lend no support to this fratricidal struggle. Its task lay in abolishing national divisions and capitalist property relations through the reorganisation of the world by means of social revolution. That is precisely what the Bolsheviks had set out to do with the seizure of power in Russia in October 1917.

None of the contradictions that lay behind the outbreak of the first imperialist slaughter were resolved at its end. If anything, they had become more putrid.

Outside of a successful extension of the Russian revolution into Europe in particular, the inter-war years proved to be only a temporary respite. As Trotsky warned in 1934, the inevitable re-eruption of conflict would be even “crueller, more destructive than its predecessor.”

Europe especially was subject to growing national tensions, economic dislocation and social upheavals.

Economic crisis meant that between 1928 and 1932 world trade fell by 30 percent and industrial production by some 50 percent. Everywhere the bourgeoisie responded with protectionist measures, such as the Smoot-Hawley act in the US. Meanwhile, the social conditions of the vast mass of the world’s population deteriorated rapidly.

Trotsky had issued the call for a new Fourth International in face of the terrible events in Germany, which had seen Hitler come to power without a shot being fired in opposition. The disastrous policy of the German Communist Party and the Comintern’s defence of it confirmed that the Third International had been destroyed by the Stalinist bureaucracy from the standpoint of international socialism.

The Fourth International was founded in 1938 on the eve of the war’s outbreak. Under tremendously dangerous conditions, an emergency conference in Paris in May 1940 adopted the Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and the Proletarian Revolution.

Addressing itself to the workers and oppressed masses of the world as the only social force capable of reorganising the globe on rational and progressive foundations, it warned that in the struggle between rival slave owners for the re-division of the world and its resources, “the capitalists are destroying and laying waste to everything created by the labor of centuries.”

In a tragically prescient forecast, it warned of the dangerous rise of chauvinism and “especially of anti-Semitism. In the epoch of its rise, capitalism took the Jewish people out of the ghetto and utilised them as an instrument in its commercial expansion. Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe, that is, less than one percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison.”

Afghanistan

At the beginning of my remarks, I said that I could only find three lines of reference to the anniversary of the Second World War in any remarks made by Brown. Those three lines were contained in a speech he made to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the remainder of which was taken up with a defence of the government’s strategy in Afghanistan and a rebuff to those who question whether British troops should be there.

Brown might not have wanted to make analogies between British involvement in Afghanistan and the 70th anniversary too obvious, but they exist nonetheless. This meeting takes place under conditions of an increasingly tense debate over how best to subjugate Afghanistan, which has seen open clashes between sections of the military top brass in the US and the Obama administration.

The top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal has called for as many as 60,000 additional troops to be despatched to the country. He outlined his demands, also in a speech to the International Institute in London, and has won support from the upper echelons of Britain’s military and much of the media.

Whatever the outcome of this debate, one thing is clear—there will be no peace in Afghanistan. While sections of the American establishment are concerned at being drawn further into the Afghan quagmire, Obama has already ruled out any scaling down of troop numbers, while Brown is considering the despatch of anywhere between 500 to 1,000 additional forces. There is complete unanimity in ruling circles that the one course of action favoured by the majority of American and British people—withdrawal from Afghanistan—is out of the question.

This fact alone demonstrates how false the hopes were that the election of Obama as president would put an end to war.

Even more recently, when Obama made the announcement that he intended to suspend the deployment of a missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, some in the British media claimed that it marked a dramatic shift from the Bush era, and a turn towards more equitable international relations. We even witnessed the obscenity of Obama being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In fact, the decision over the missile defence shield and the discussions over strategy in Afghanistan are purely of a tactical nature. Some in Washington have concluded that in order to win the war in Afghanistan, while maintaining the occupation of Iraq, it is necessary to it to draw on the support of its European allies and other powers such as Russia.

But the essential fault-lines remain. As the International Committee of the Fourth International has insisted, a renewed scramble to re-divide the world is underway. And despite the passage of more than 60 years, there is a continuum between this struggle and the one that characterised the first half of the 20th century.

Due to the role played by Stalinism and social democracy in suppressing revolution, the Second World War did not end with the overthrow of capitalism. With the defeat of Germany, its partition and the Cold War division between the Soviet Union and the capitalist nation states under the political and economic hegemony of US imperialism, European capitalism was resuscitated.

For all the tensions involved in these relations, this framework provided a degree of equilibrium to international relations. Ferguson acknowledges as much when he states that the 50 years of war only really concluded in 1953—that is, with the advent of the Cold War.

But the basic contradictions were only suppressed, not abolished. One has only to review the period since 1991, which saw the dissolution of the USSR and the collapse of the Eastern European states, to confirm this.

The International Committee was alone in rejecting claims that what was involved in these overturns was the “collapse of communism” and the “triumph of liberal democracy”. Rather, we insisted that the same economic forces that had undermined the national autarkic regimes and shattered the post-war arrangements—the developments in technology and globalised production—had opened up a new period of convulsions, that

could not find resolution under capitalism without the violent restructuring of political and economic relations.

This was especially the case when these overturns had opened up vast new areas of the globe previously sealed off to capitalist penetration by the October 1917 revolution—including some of the greatest untapped oil reserves in the world, especially in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea.

The United States has responded most aggressively to these changes. It is not only that its efforts to establish a truly global empire were hampered for some seven decades or so by the existence of the Soviet Union. The opening up of these areas coincided with a major reversal in the fortunes of the US, which has been transformed from the world's premier creditor nation to its most indebted.

Under conditions where its declining economic might could be challenged, not only by its old rivals in Europe, but by new emerging powers in China and India, it has sought to exploit the one advantage it still possessed—its military superiority—in order to offset its economic weakness.

It is this that accounts for the outburst of US aggression since 1991—beginning with the first intervention in the Persian Gulf that year, through the attack on Yugoslavia, the interventions against Iraq and Afghanistan and now threats against Iran.

We have repeatedly drawn attention to the statements of the leading ideologues of US imperialism, in particular those of Zbigniew Brzezinski—a former adviser to the Carter Presidency and now a leading adviser to Obama.

In his book, *The Grand Chessboard*, published in 1997 Brzezinski outlined the importance of Eurasia—home to 75 percent of the world's population, 60 percent of its GNP, and 75 percent of its energy resources—as “the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played.”

“...the issue of how a globally engaged America copes with the complex Eurasian power relationships—and particularly whether it prevents the emergence of a dominant antagonistic Eurasian power—remains central to America's capacity to exercise global hegemony,” he warned.

For Brzezinski, the US cannot expect to dominate Eurasia single-handedly. Its economic decline and the rise of other powers means that pursuance of its long-term objective of domination over the Middle East and Central Asia are best served by attempting to effect a balance of powers most in its favour, while giving no other nation the upper-hand.

To this end he has been supportive of enlisting the aid of other powers, and has backed British and German calls for the United Nations to convene a conference on Afghanistan. Far from bringing peace to Afghanistan, however, this is a cynical mechanism through which the European powers are seeking to establish a greater role for themselves in the attempts to carve-up Central Asia.

Nor is Afghanistan the sole target. By enlisting greater international support, the US hopes to pursue its objectives against Iran.

Let me read to you an article by Robert Kaplan, the right-wing commentator. In a May/June 2009 piece for the *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled “The Revenge of Geography”, Kaplan also evoked Mackinder and his thesis on Eurasia as the guide to our times. Just as the European powers had found themselves with no room to expand in the early 20th century, thereby leading to global conflicts, a similar process is underway today.

Kaplan, of course, cites Eurasia itself, and the emergence of China amongst others, as the source of this instability. He enumerates numerous Eurasian “shatter zones”, including what he defines at its “Persian core, stretching from the Caspian Sea to Iran's north to the Persian Gulf to its south”—home to virtually all of the greater Middle East's oil and natural gas, as well as the central point for the world's shipping lanes as well as numerous oil pipelines.

Iran, he notes, is the “only country that straddles both energy-producing areas”.

In remarks which make clear the real content of Western complaints that the recent elections in Iran were “stolen”, as well as the reactionary role played by the various petty bourgeois pseudo-left left groups in lining up behind the Mousavi opposition movement, he sets out what he euphemistically describes as the policy of “containment” for Iran. The purpose, he explains, is “to impose pressure on the contradictions of the unpopular theocratic regime in Tehran, such that it eventually changes from within”. Regime change, in other words, backed up with the threat of force.

“We all must learn to think like Victorians”, Kaplan writes. Especially, “as the ongoing recession will likely cause the global economy to contract for the first time in six decades. Not only wealth, but political and social order, will erode in many places, leaving only nature's frontiers and men's passion as the main arbiters of that age-old question: who can coerce whom?”

A renewed struggle to divide the world

There is no such thing as a “benign” hegemony or friendly balance of power.

Who says Germany, China, Russia or any other power will simply acquiesce to America's leading role in any new international balance of forces?

In the last week we have seen reports that the Gulf States, along with China, Russia, Japan and France, have been secretly planning to end the use of the dollar in dealings for oil, moving instead to a basket of currencies. The reports have been denied, but last month China took the decision to sell its first batch of sovereign bonds in Yuan to foreigners.

Writing in the *Independent*, Robert Fisk cited a warning by Sun Bigan, China's former special envoy to the Middle East, that “bilateral quarrels and clashes are unavoidable” between China and the US in the area. “This sounds like a dangerous prediction of a future economic war between the US and China over Middle East oil—yet again turning the region's conflicts into a battle for great power supremacy,” Fisk wrote.

The point is that the renewed struggle for control of raw materials and resources has an objective logic. Writing in the *Guardian*, September 17, Tristram Hunt opined that though few may recall Mackinder's name, “foreign policy is now played out in his shadow.”

“Today, in Georgia, Chechnya, Afghanistan and even Iran, an overt and covert battle for the Heartland grinds on... the tensions of our own times have brought back to life the musings of one of the most influential academics of the 20th century.”

Already the shores around Somalia, which sits between the geo-strategic waterways of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, are home to 25 to 30 naval warships from France, Britain, Germany, Russia, China and the US—all supposedly against pirates.

To take another example, what are the consequences of the US-led extension of the Afghan war into Pakistan for the stability of this region, bristling with nuclear weapons, and for its ally China?

Only in August 2008, we saw the outbreak of a proxy war between US and Russia where, with Washington's backing, the Georgian administration launched an attack on Russian forces in South Ossetia. On that occasion, what essentially concerned a battle for control over export routes for Central Asia's energy resources concluded without further incident.

For how much longer? *Businessnews Europe* reported September 30, that the oil-rich former Soviet republics had attracted billions of dollars in

funding from China in particular, as the “Eurasian region is already seeing growing rivalry between global majors and national companies from Russia, China, India, Japan and South Korea hoping to secure access to the region's mineral wealth.”

Up until this point, concern at American unilateralism has largely dictated the response of the European bourgeoisie. And again, for how much longer?

Writing in the *New York Times* on September 7, for instance, John Vinocur complained that it was no longer possible to rely on Germany.

Its “ambiguous” relations with Russia, its rejection of an EU wide bailout, its “murkiness” over NATO and, not least, its decision to “save” Opel, with Russian funding, at the expense of dumping a major GM asset, had all brought into question its reliability as a US ally.

Stephen F. Szabo, executive director of the Transatlantic Academy, located at the German Marshall Fund's offices in the United States, went further. “Berlin plays a decisive role in shaping a coherent and successful” policy by Washington and Europe towards Russia, he wrote. However, he continued, “Voices in the West are raising concerns about Germany's reliability as a partner.”

Szabo cited the right-wing *Weekly Standard's* complaint that “the Germany of today is not the partner the United States once had,” as well as the remarks by Brzezinski that, should “the romance between Russia and Germany go[es] too far, it could strike a blow against European integration.”

Listen to Szabo's language: “There has long been an undercurrent of worry about Germany's reliability as a partner, dating back to the Rapallo complex of the 1920s, when Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics engaged in a policy of accommodation that raised concerns in Western Europe about a potential anti-West alliance, and more recently, references to a new Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, in which Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin agreed to carve up Poland in 1939, an action that opened the door for Hitler to begin World War II.”

Militarism and the attack on social conditions, democratic rights

At the centre of the battle for global supremacy is a massive assault on working class living standards and democratic rights.

The point I want to stress is that the processes I have sought to outline have been underway for some time and were developing under conditions of an apparent boom.

In reality, as is now all too apparent, the rising stock markets and record profits were the outcome of an orgy of financial parasitism in the interests of the super-rich, paid for by massive indebtedness of broad layers of the working class, lower wages and greater levels of exploitation.

The result is an economic crisis broadly acknowledged to be the worst since 1929, and even beyond this.

The US administration is considering a probable increase in troop numbers to Afghanistan just over one year after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which triggered near global economic breakdown.

Let me read you this account from the *Sunday Times* October 3, just four weeks after Lehman's downfall. In that period, the British government had been forced to patch up a rescue operation between HBOS and Lloyds TSB, while it had partly privatised Bradford & Bingley.

The article recounts how one of the top Treasury civil servants informed a group of investment bankers that the Royal Bank of Scotland—the largest bank in Britain, with a loan book bigger than any other bank in the world—was bust.

“Although the public didn't know, a torrent of money was flooding out, withdrawn by big companies, central banks and wealthy individuals...

Unless a government bailout could be agreed that weekend, RBS would be shut down first thing on Monday.”

“If RBS collapsed,” Kingman continued, “one third of payments made every day would stop. Wages would go missing, bills go unpaid, savings disappear overnight.”

There is no reason to doubt this account. The bourgeoisie, driven by short-term self-interest, have behaved as criminal economic wreckers over the last decades, bringing entire economies—such as Iceland and Ireland—to the point of devastation.

The well-known economists Barry Eichengreen and Kevin O'Rourke in April produced a comparison between the immediate aftermath of the Crash of 2008 to that of 1929. The study, which attracted 30,000 viewers in just two days, and more than a 100,000 in one week, showed that the impact of the 2008 crash surpassed that of 1929, with production down 12 percent, as compared to 5 percent in the six months that followed the 1929 Crash, and trade by 16 percent, as compared to 5 percent in the earlier crisis. Across the board, global manufacturing had fallen, and the export trade was down sharply—by 20 percent in Germany, 46 percent in Japan and 23 percent in America.

Last month they updated this appraisal. Despite certain indications of a recovery, they concluded that the “proportionate decline in stock market wealth remains even greater than at the comparable stage of the Great Depression”, and that the “collapse of global trade, even now, remains dramatic by the standards of the Great Depression.”

I should add that China, the world's second largest exporter, fell 23.4 percent in August compared to the same month last year.

Now Eichengreen and O'Rourke's assessment comes under conditions where almost \$11 trillion has been spent bailing out failing banks and trying to repair the financial system—\$10,000 for every person in the world's largest economies.

The UK and the US spent the most, with the UK spending proportionally far more—94 percent of its GDP, compared to 25 percent in the US.

Over the next five years, UK government debt is expected to rise from £600 billion to £1.4 trillion, while the US national debt could double to \$10 trillion. Even that is not the end. According to IMF calculations, British bank losses of about \$1,300 billion were just the start. They are expected to write down a further \$1,500 billion by the end of 2010.

The bailouts were presented as an act of altruism, designed to save jobs and living standards. This is a fraud. What was in fact a massive diversion of public funds to protect the wealth of the financial oligarchy is being further used to press forward with a fundamental restructuring of capitalism, through the impoverishment of the working class and oppressed masses.

The stock markets have soared, funded by taxpayers' monies, and the super-rich have resumed business as usual. To underscore this, the UK has now overtaken the US as the world's leading financial centre, according to the World Economic Forum. This is a country which spent some 94 percent of its GDP, as I said, on bailing out rotten banks.

Meanwhile, in every corner of the globe, working people are being made to carry the can, with poverty and inequality developing apace. To cite just one statistic, for the first time in history, more than one billion people, or nearly one in every six inhabitants of the planet, are going hungry this year, according to a new report from the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP)—with rising food prices and the economic recession amongst the major factors.

In the advanced countries, far from these bailouts saving jobs, unemployment is rising everywhere and being used to drive down wages and overturn working conditions—as seen at GM and its European division, Opel.

In the US, official unemployment is on target for 10 percent, with some 15 million workers jobless—double the figure at the end of 2007. In reality,

the figure is more than 25 million.

In the Eurozone, unemployment is at 9.4 percent, and youth unemployment at 19.5 percent. Again, those are official figures. In Germany alone, real unemployment stands close to six million. Similarly in the UK, official unemployment stands at 2.5 million, with almost one million under the age of 25, but the real figure is far higher.

Everywhere, the demand is for sacrifice. In Britain, Labour and the Conservatives attempt to outdo each other with talk of spending cuts that go further than anything ever before attempted. The Tories made big play of their determination to go the extra mile, but it has been pointed out that even their supposedly “brave” proposed cuts package amounts to just £7 billion of the £100 billion being demanded by big business.

Everywhere the mantra is the same. The national debt is unsustainable and must be repaid. So, to secure the future, people must accept wage cuts and pay freezes, the extension of retirement age and cuts in health and education.

This again is a fraud. Who is it being repaid to? To cite one figure, at least £30 billion per year is being spent just on meeting interest loans on the bailout debt that went to the very same institutions that had to be rescued in the first place.

The truth, as Martin Wolf put it so succinctly in the October 8 *Financial Times*, is that “The crisis is a golden opportunity to impose discipline and make reforms.”

Of course, while the powers-that-be demand sweeping cuts in social welfare and public spending, there is absolute agreement that the one area that must be safeguarded above all others is defence.

Trade and military war presuppose a major social realignment and the increased militarization of domestic life in every country. It is this which accounts for the growing intervention of the military into US political life—as witnessed by McChrystal’s public insistence on a massive surge into Afghanistan. This is a phenomenon we are seeing repeated here in the UK, with the Tories’ appointment of General Sir Richard Dannatt, former army chief, as their defence adviser, after he, amongst others, had made a number of public attacks on the Labour government over the lack of troop numbers and resources in Afghanistan.

It is impossible to fight war or the social devastation now being carried through without tackling its underlying causes in the capitalist economic order and the nation state system on which it is based. It requires the development of a unified political struggle by workers in every country for a socialist alternative. This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Party.



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