

European Trotskyists mark seventieth anniversary of World War II

“It was industrialised slaughter on an unimaginable scale”

Barbara Slaughter
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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. We publish below the remarks made by veteran Trotskyist and SEP (UK) Central Committee member Barbara Slaughter.

I am part of an ageing generation that lived through the Second World War. I grew from childhood to adulthood under conditions of war. But until I joined the Trotskyist movement in 1958, I had no real understanding of the issues involved in that conflict or why it was fought.

I remember very clearly a conversation I had, at the age of 12, with a school friend two or three days before war broke out. We were sitting on a fence and she told me that her dad had said there wouldn't be a war and I insisted that my dad had said that there would. Within days of having that conversation, I was standing in the yard of my school, lining up with other children to be evacuated out of the city of Leeds, and my mother was outside the railings weeping and wondering if she would ever see me again.

It was then only 21 years since the end of the World War I, the so-called “war to end all wars.” But this was a war of a different character even from that bloody conflict.

It was what was described as “total war,” unlike anything that had been witnessed before. It was industrialised slaughter on an unimaginable scale, which resulted in the deaths of up to 70 million people.

It was a conflict in which an entire generation was killed, in which whole cities were destroyed—the terrible sufferings at the siege of Stalingrad, the horrors of the Russian front, the fire-bombings of Tokyo, Dresden and other cities that killed tens of thousands of civilians in a single night, the mass murder of six million Jews.

The British Air Force targeted dams in Germany that poured torrential water over farmlands, through villages and towns, into factories and mines, drowning terrified workers. This act of brutality is praised even today, with a statue being unveiled by the Queen Mother a few years ago to Air Force Chief Arthur Harris, who initiated the bombing campaign. From 1942 to 1945, a campaign of “terror bombing” destroyed most of the cities of Germany and killed 600,000 people, most of them women and children.

On July 27, 1943, Hamburg was fire-bombed with the aim of the total destruction of the city. Some 40,000 people were killed.

By the end of the war, there were no great industrial cities left in Germany, and so scores of smaller towns of no conceivable military or industrial importance were obliterated, like Darmstadt, which was razed to the ground on September 11, 1944.

It was official policy to target working class housing areas, because they

had a higher density and firestorms were more likely. In October 1943, Harris wrote to Churchill: “The aim of the Combined Bomber Offensive... should be unambiguously stated [as] the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers, and the disruption of civilized life throughout Germany.”

The most controversial raid of the war took place in the late evening of February 13, 1945. It was the bombing of Dresden by British and American planes, resulting in a lethal firestorm which killed several tens of thousands of civilians.

These horrific war crimes were carried out in the name of the defence of democracy and civilisation.

After the fall of France, Churchill and the government propaganda machine portrayed Britain as a brave little island fighting on behalf of the people of the world for the defence of democracy. And this was widely accepted. The country was mobilised into the war effort, and a whole generation of youth was conscripted into the armed forces believing they were in fighting for democracy against the evils of fascism.

But far from being just a “little island,” Britain was the most powerful colonial nation the world had ever seen. The British Empire made up one-fifth of the earth's surface, including the Indian subcontinent as well as vast regions in Africa.

The colonial peoples were cruelly oppressed and exploited and the British bourgeoisie extracted vast raw materials and financial resources from every corner of the globe. It was this power which was challenged by the German war machine. In order to become a world power, the German bourgeoisie required access to the resources of the world. And the establishment of Germany as a world power was something which the British ruling class could not tolerate.

The only possible response of all the major capitalist powers to the economic crisis that was raging in the 1920s and 30s was trade war, leading to military conflict.

In 1938, Trotsky had warned of the imminence of war, which he described as “a catastrophe that threatened the whole culture of mankind.” And what was the essence of that conflict? It was an imperialist war waged by the capitalist great powers—“democratic” and fascist alike—for the division of the world and its resources in the interests of profit.

This was understood by a small group of individuals who were part of the Fourth International, which was established in 1938 and took upon itself the task of building a new international movement to resolve the crisis of working class leadership. It was only the Trotskyist movement that could analyse and explain the real nature of the conflict, trace its class character and its historical origins.

It was not enough to have lived through the war and experienced its horrors, as I and millions of others throughout the world had done, to understand its real character. The vast majority of people in the West

believed that it was necessary to support the war and to make any and every sacrifice because, as I have said, they believed that the war was being fought for the defence of democracy against dictatorship.

I was 12 when the war began. I had witnessed as a child the sufferings of the working class during the thirties, when I saw neighbours being turned out of their houses because they couldn't pay their rent, when my mother didn't have one penny in her purse at the end of the week, when the father of a school friend was jailed because he took a part-time job when he was drawing the dole.

As a small child, I was conscious of these injustices. I was also aware of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. My mother was Spanish and was deeply concerned about the events in Spain. I have vivid memories of attending a meeting at the Co-Op hall in Leeds when little children who were refugees from the bombing of Guernica were paraded on the stage in an attempt to find families that would take them in.

My parents were socialists. They supported the Russian Revolution. But like millions of workers all over the world, they had no understanding of the treacherous character of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the role it played in Spain and elsewhere. And neither did I.

For example, I remember as a 16-year-old girl sitting in the school library reading a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg, a well known Soviet writer, called *The Fall of Paris*. The book described the tragic situation in Spain in 1936, when the Western nations refused to sell arms to the Spanish government under the policy of so-called "non-intervention." The British Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress passed conference resolutions in support of the Conservative government's position at their conferences that year.

Ehrenburg's book was written as if it was some sort of Greek tragedy, in which the Spanish people were inevitably condemned to defeat, and I was terribly upset by it. I wept inconsolably and all the teachers came running in to see what the matter was. I couldn't explain to them why I was so upset, but I thought at the time that I understood the issues involved.

It wasn't until years later, after I had become a Trotskyist, that I learnt that that novel was a fabric of lies. There was nothing inevitable about the victory of Franco in Spain. Ehrenburg was an arch-Stalinist. He received the Stalin Prize in 1942 and 1948, and the International Lenin Peace Prize in 1952. He was a war correspondent for *Izvestia* in Spain in 1936 and must have been fully aware of everything that was going on.

The Western powers refused to sell arms to the Republican government. But it was the Stalinists who were responsible for the defeat of what was undoubtedly a revolutionary situation in Spain.

The Popular Front strategy, through which the Stalin bureaucracy hoped to curry favour with the Western powers in the years immediately before the war, tied the Spanish working class to the bourgeoisie. The Communist Party and agents of the KGB were hunting down and murdering the Trotskyists, claiming they were agents of Hitler.

The working class uprising in Barcelona in May 1937 was put down in blood, by government forces under the orders of the KGB, as you may have seen in the film *Land and Freedom*. The Kremlin insisted that armed workers' detachments should return their weapons to the government, to whom they would also cede political and military control of the war effort, and thus the anti-fascist forces were condemned to defeat.

Had the Spanish Revolution been victorious, it would have led to a renewal of revolutionary struggles across Europe and strengthened the opposition to the bureaucracy within the Soviet Union. But the Spanish working class was sacrificed to the immediate interests of the Stalinists. Trotsky pointed out that Stalin traded in the working class movement just as he traded in oil, manganese and other goods.

Until the war began in September 1939, powerful factions of the French and British ruling class hoped that Hitler would attack the USSR and thereby eliminate their main enemy without them firing a shot. This was

the thinking behind the Munich agreement of 1938, which dismembered Czechoslovakia. I remember the news reels when Neville Chamberlain came back from Germany waving a piece of paper and muttering, "Peace in our time."

Eleven days before the beginning of the Second World War, Stalin had signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler which allowed Hitler to attack the West without facing a war on two fronts. Members of the communist parties of France and Britain, who had been calling for an alliance between the Soviet Union and the West against the fascist powers, had to perform an about-turn and adopt a position of neutrality towards the fascists.

After Hitler's attack on Russia in 1941, the Soviet Union, which had formerly been portrayed in the west as the Bolshevik "Red Menace," became "our brave Russian allies." In fact, the courage and fortitude of the Russian people in defending the gains of 1917, despite the counter-revolutionary role of the Stalinist bureaucracy, won the admiration of millions of workers all over the world. They recognised that the Soviet working class had something to defend.

Throughout the war, the British propaganda machine pumped out a message of hatred against everything German. They could not have justified their policy of complete destruction of German cities if they had not done so. The German people were totally identified with the Nazis, despite the fact that up to the beginning of the war the greatest victim of Nazism was the German working class itself.

Here too, Ehrenburg played a key role as propagandist of hate for the Stalinist bureaucracy. They had long ago abandoned any allegiance to the principles of revolutionary internationalism or recognition of the contribution that had been made by the German working class to the struggle for socialism.

The nationalist degeneration of the bureaucracy was clearly illustrated in one of Ehrenburg's statements. He declared: "The Germans are not human beings. Henceforth, the word German means to us the most terrible curse. From now on, the word German will trigger your rifle... there is nothing more amusing for us than a heap of German corpses. Do not count days; do not count miles. Count only the number of Germans you have killed. Kill the German—this is your old mother's prayer. Kill the German—this is what your children beseech you to do. Kill the German—this is the cry of your Russian earth. Do not waver. Do not let up. Kill."

It was this propaganda of hate of everything German that made possible the fire-bombings of German cities, and similar propaganda against the Japanese was used to justify the horrific bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945.

Despite the horror that I and millions of others felt when the news of the dropping of the atom bombs came through, the reasons behind it were totally incomprehensible to us. We did not realise that rather than being necessary to finish off the war with the minimum loss of American lives, as we were being told, the real reason for these unprecedented war crimes was to issue a warning to the Soviet Union about the military power of the United States and its willingness to use it in future conflicts.

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 I had witnessed.

During the next 11 years I was thoroughly miseducated by the Stalinists. 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 1956, 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.

The foundations of a new economic equilibrium were established after the war, as a result of the betrayals of the Stalinist and Social Democratic leaderships of the working class and the huge economic power of the United States of America. That economic equilibrium no longer exists.

The Soviet Union has collapsed. The whole world is involved in the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. The new powers of China and, to a lesser extent, India have arrived on the scene and are challenging the established imperialist powers. The Social Democratic parties and the trade unions all over the world no longer even pretend to represent the interests of the working class. Capitalism can offer nothing but economic crisis and the threat of war even more deadly than the last.

Today, I am proud to be standing on this platform alongside comrades from France and Germany, united on the basis of genuine socialist internationalism. Such unity is possible only under the banner of the Fourth International. Our task is to resolve the crisis of working class leadership, to build this party, to educate and prepare the working class for the coming revolutionary struggles against capitalism, the establishment of workers' power and the creation of a socialist society.



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