

European Trotskyists mark seventieth anniversary of World War II

Whole families were forced into exile due to their anti-Nazism

Françoise Thull
4 November 2009

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 here the remarks made by Françoise Thull, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in Germany (Partei Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG), who spoke on the experiences of her family in France during that period.

I would like to address today the experiences of the French working class in the Second World War with the Nazi occupation and the collaborationist régime of Marshall Philippe Pétain.

The harrowing experiences of workers only a decade and a half earlier in the First World War had imbued them with a profoundly anti-militarist sentiment. They were very hostile to French imperialism's renewed war drive in the 1930s. However, through the betrayals of the Stalinists in the Communist Party and of the Socialist Party, the working class was finally dragooned into this war and had to suffer the consequences.

The determination of the French bourgeoisie to make workers pay for the Great Depression brought them into a revolutionary confrontation with the ruling class in the 1936 general strike, involving a vast wave of factory occupations. The Social Democratic, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies betrayed the strike and its revolutionary potential. They assisted the Popular Front government to save French capitalism during the economic crisis.

The Popular Front, elected in 1936, tied the interests of the working class to those of the imperialist bourgeoisie on a national and bourgeois democratic "republican" platform. It strangled the strike offensive of the working class on the basis of a number of concessions that were clawed back very soon after. Finally, the bourgeoisie resorted to dictatorship in the form of the Pétain government, which, allied to the Nazi regime, organised the brutal exploitation of the working class. It harnessed the economy to the Nazi war effort and carried out the systematic extermination of Jews and other sections of the French population.

In France, under Trotsky's leadership, the Fourth International fought against these betrayals, putting forward an international socialist programme for the revolutionary overthrow of French and German imperialism as part of the fight for world socialism.

My family went through these experiences and, like the whole of the working population, had to pay the price for not having a successful socialist revolution. This was compounded by the fact that they lived in the Sarre area, the border area between France, Germany and Luxemburg.

In 1935, my grandfather, who was a miner, lived with his family in this area.

The Sarre area, like Lorraine and Alsace, had already been subjected for

many decades to the vindictiveness of the French and German imperialist states as they fought it out on the world arena, grabbing each other's territories and subjecting in turn the local populations to their nationalist and warmongering agendas. The Sarre is part of the industrial and mining basin that stretches over four states—France, Germany, Luxemburg and Belgium—and is a key region for its industries and mining resources for both iron ore and coal.

Making use of war reparations for the First World War, French capitalism had seized the rich coalfield of the Sarre. The region had been made a protectorate of the League of Nations by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which gave France the right to exploit the coalmines for a 15-year period. The treaty also restored Alsace and Lorraine to France. They had been ceded to Germany in 1871 after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war.

Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 due to the betrayals of the Stalinists and the Social Democrats. In 1935, there was a plebiscite of the population of the Sarre to determine which state it would be part of, Germany or France. The population had experienced French imperialism. They had no confidence in the Communist Parties or the Socialist Parties, and they ended up voting, by an overwhelming majority, for the incorporation of the Sarre into Germany.

Trotsky says this about the event in *Whither France?*:

"The Sarre Plebiscite was, we might say, an experiment expressly designed to show how much confidence the German proletariat had left in the Second and Third Internationals. The results are known: facing the necessity of choosing between the triumphant violence of Hitler and the rotten impotence of the bankrupt working class parties, the masses gave Hitler 90 percent of their votes, and ... probably no more than 7 percent to the united front of the Second and Third Internationals. *This is the combined balance sheet of reformism and Stalinism.* Alas for those who have not understood this lesson!

"The working masses voted for Hitler because they saw no other road. The parties which for decades had aroused and organised them in the name of Socialism, deceived and betrayed them. That is the general conclusion that the workers came to. If the flag of the socialist revolution had been raised higher in France, the Sarre proletariat would have turned its eyes to the West and would have put class solidarity above national solidarity.... That is why the Sarre plebiscite is not merely a test of the results of the German catastrophe, but a *formidable warning for the French proletariat.* Disaster awaits the parties which slide over the surface of events, lull themselves with words, hope in miracles and allow the mortal enemy to organize without hindrance, to arm, to occupy the advantageous positions and to choose the most favourable moment for launching the decisive blow! This is the lesson of the Saar."

Being incorporated into Germany meant the persecution of the

opponents of Nazism. My grandparents immediately suffered from the consequences of the vote on January 13. On January 16, scarcely three days later, they and their eldest son were put on a convoy of anti-fascists from the Communist bastion Dudweiler and sent to France. It was a neighbourhood where workers had fought the rise of Hitler in street battles with the Nazis.

According to the official police lists some 200 others were also forced into exile under threat of prosecution and death because of their political convictions and their hostility to the rise of Nazism. In fact the figures are far greater because whole families left the Sarre.

Forced by mass unemployment, itself the result of the world economic crisis which had started in the United States and spread to Germany and France, my father enlisted in 1935 in the French army at the age of 20.

In 1938, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, which was a vital part of France and Britain's system of alliances on the continent. War seemed imminent. The French government decreed first a partial military mobilization and my father was drafted. He was demobilised shortly afterwards, after the signing of the Munich agreement. Once, I asked my mother why the French government had demobilised the army, she answered in her laconic way: "Because the Germans weren't ready for war yet"—which was in essence correct.

But in 1939, Poland was attacked, the French government mobilised again and my father was drafted for the second time. For eight months there was no fighting. The French army were not attacked by the Germans. It simply retired behind the fortifications of the Maginot Line. This was the so-called "phoney war." The French bourgeoisie was more concerned with plans to conquer the Soviet Union than to efficiently oppose an invasion. They ignored the clear warnings that Hitler would invade through Holland and Belgium, bypassing the reputedly "impregnable" Maginot Line.

The American historian, William Shirer, quotes William Bullitt, the American ambassador in France, as saying: "The French position is, that France will not break off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, nor declare war, but will destroy the Soviet Union if possible—by means of cannons if need be."

The French Communist Party (PCF) was supporting Stalin's pact with Hitler, when on May 10, 1940, Germany launched a six-week-long offensive that ended with the disintegration of the French army. With the taking of Paris, the bourgeois regime that had ruled France for more than seven decades collapsed.

The Mountain Infantry Battalion, which my father was in, fought in the Battle of the Aisne, a vital river and line of defence in the Champagne area. After the German advance and bombardment it had to retreat on June 11 in an indescribable debacle. In one day, this battalion lost almost three-quarters of its 400 men. The rest, including my father, were taken prisoner.

But he managed to escape and get back to Lorraine. Within six weeks of the German offensive 100,000 French soldiers were killed and nearly 2 million captured and sent to prison camps.

While general disorganisation had started in May, at the beginning of June, general panic seized the country. On June 14 the French army declared Paris an "open city," meaning that it would not be defended. The government fled to Bordeaux. As the Wehrmacht entered Paris, some 9 million people, together with refugees from Belgium and fleeing French troops, started a disorderly and desperate flight towards the South of the country. The roads were jam-packed, many people had no resources and they were under fire from German warplanes. My mother had been evacuated to the South West before, in September 1939, as sections of the population from around the Maginot fortifications were transferred there.

Marshal Pétain plotted with other extreme right-wing politicians to replace the moribund republican regime with a so-called government of "national renewal," a military dictatorship. On June 16, 1940, he replaced

Paul Reynaud as prime minister and went into negotiations with Hitler for an armistice, which was signed on June 22, 1940. The deal enabled the Nazis to extend their war operations, having politically "neutralised" France. On July 10 the national assembly voted overwhelmingly (569 votes against 80) to give Pétain unrestricted powers.

The establishment of the dictatorship in France was not just the outcome of the military defeat, but was a political decision by the bourgeoisie to deal with the working class.

My father's youngest brother returned from the exodus in October 1940. Like many other youth from Alsace and Lorraine, the Nazis forcibly recruited him in 1941 at the age of 17 into the Reicharbeitsdienst, the Reich Labour Service. It served to maintain German productive capacity and contribute to the war effort. Then in 1942, the compulsory military draft was promulgated for young people born in 1924 in this region and he was forced to put on a German uniform. He was integrated into the Wehrmacht. Between 80 and 90 percent of these youth were sent to the Russian front in order to prevent desertions. He was never to come back.

When I was born, in 1942, my father and my mother were working for the Reichsbahn (the German railways) and my mother was the replacement for the regular level-crossing attendant. When the Nazis annexed Alsace and a part of Lorraine, the rail network run by the French SNCF was transferred to the Reichsbahn. The railway line was used to transport deportees to the concentration camps.

In the rest of France the SNCF used its cattle or freight carriages, with blocked doors and windows, and no food, water or toilet, in order to deport Jews, gypsies, homosexuals as well as political prisoners to the concentration camps. For each deported person the SNCF charged and pocketed the fare for a third class ticket.

The working class in the towns, the poor peasantry in the countryside in the Resistance and their class brothers in the various allied armies bore the brunt of the struggle to get the Wehrmacht out of France. Again, their socialist aspirations were betrayed by the Stalinists who subordinated their struggle to the wing of the French bourgeoisie that had allied itself with American and British imperialism and was led by General Charles De Gaulle.

Under conditions where the vast majority of the French bourgeoisie was thoroughly discredited because of their role, before and during the war, 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.

After the war in 1945 everything needed to be rebuilt. There was rationing, wages were small, working conditions were terrible and shortages of raw materials caused unemployment.

My father was young and raising two children. Though he did not want to go to the mines due to his father's experience, he had no choice but to become a miner in Lorraine. After an accident at the bottom of the mine where he nearly lost his thumb, he decided to go back to the Sarre in 1946. He got a job there, where he worked until he retired. When he claimed his pension, he found that his years of military service did not count towards it.

Today, the imperialist bourgeoisie is again faced with a worldwide crisis. Again it resorts, as it did in the 1930s, to protectionism and nationalism and poisons the political atmosphere with racist campaigns. The French bourgeoisie gears itself for more wars in the Middle East and Central Asia to defend its geopolitical interests. While the French bourgeois press is presently howling with their British and American counterparts against Iran for possessing nuclear plants, they said nothing as quite recently two successive French presidents have threatened Iran with nuclear annihilation.

The working class has to draw the lessons from history and fight for its

own independent socialist programme against militarism and war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact