Book Review

Bryan Palmer's *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-1938*

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***James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-38* by Bryan D. Palmer, paperback, 1208 pp. Haymarket Books, 2023**

Historian Bryan Palmer's second in a planned three-volume series on the pioneering American Trotskyist James P. Cannon covers the period from 1928, when Cannon was expelled from the American Communist Party (CP) for defending Leon Trotsky's positions, until 1938, when he played a leading role in the founding of the Fourth International and what was then its American section, the Socialist Workers Party.

The first volume, published in 2007, treated Cannon's contribution to the development of American communism in its early days. Palmer concluded that effort with Cannon obtaining, by chance, a translated copy of Trotsky's "Critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern," prepared for the Sixth Congress held in Moscow in 1928, at which the future leader of American Trotskyism was a delegate. Before reading that document, Cannon had not understood the critical issues of international revolutionary strategy underlying the struggle being waged by the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky, against the Stalinist bureaucracy that controlled the Communist Party and Soviet state.

Cannon, together with the Canadian Maurice Spector (1898-1968), agreed with Trotsky's devastating analysis of Stalinism, and advocated for his positions on return to North America, backed by Max Shachtman (1904-1972) and Martin Abern (1898-1949). Though the Left Opposition was from the beginning an internationalist tendency, Cannon's adherence to its program in 1928 and his founding of the first Trotskyist organization in the US, the Communist League of America (CLA), marked its emergence as an international movement and helped lay the groundwork for the formation of the Fourth International. These facts alone impart immense importance to Palmer's subject.

The present volume is an indispensable source of information on the early history of Trotskyism in the US—it is indeed more a history of American Trotskyism than a biography of Cannon. At 1,153 pages of text, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism* is truly encyclopedic.

Length owed to arduous work is to the author's credit: Palmer makes use of 19 separate archival collections, 35 historical newspapers, something approaching 200 published writings by Cannon, and some 500 books, including 40 from Trotsky. It is all carefully footnoted.

Yet certain problems arise from the sheer volume of research. The reader is confronted with a vast and at times overwhelming amount of detail. In such a book, it is an easy matter to lose the forest of historical meaning in the dense thicket of branches created by the many events and individuals discussed.

The central historical, political and theoretical issues upon which the Trotskyist movement was focused between 1928 and 1938 recede into the background, one among many subjects dealt with, usually quite extensively, and sometimes in granular detail.

These include, but are not limited to, the efforts of Cannon and his supporters, after their expulsion, to piece together a movement out of scattered fragments of the Communist Party and American left, and to begin publishing[1] and holding meetings in the face of violent and even murderous persecution at the hands of the Stalinists;[2] the "Dog Days" of the early 1930s when the Trotskyists struggled to gain a footing in the working class—and Cannon struggled with party factionalism and trying personal circumstances; Cannon's fight in the early 1930s to break out of isolation and into the working class, especially among the Illinois coal miners; the Minneapolis Teamsters strike of 1934, which was led by the Trotskyists; "entryism," first with the American Workers Party of A. J. Muste (1885-1967) and then with the "French Turn" into the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas (1884-1968); Cannon's work among California maritime workers; the setting up of the Dewey Commission inquiry into the slanders made against Trotsky at Stalin's Moscow Trials; the struggle to gain influence among the autoworkers in the late 1930s; the challenges raised by work in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the difficulties in penetrating the rival Committee for Industrial Organizations (CIO—later called the Congress of Industrial Organizations); and finally the effort to build the Socialist Workers Party as well as the Fourth International, including Cannon's 1938 trip to Britain as Trotsky's emissary in a bid to unify the various English factions maintaining adherence to Trotskyism.

Through all of this, Cannon comes across as the foremost leader of the American Trotskyists, but a leader, nonetheless, constantly drawn into struggle against the rest of the inner party leadership.

There was always opposition to Cannon in the movement's center, the resident National Committee in New York. Those who opposed him fluctuated somewhat, but Abern was consistent in his hostility from about 1930 on—and in his reliance on behind-the-scenes clique methods to achieve factional ends. In the early 1930s, Shachtman, Spector, and Albert Glotzer (1908-1989) arrayed against Cannon. Comrades that Cannon cultivated, including Hugo Oehler (1903-1983) and Tom Stamm, later turned against him, and there was a period of acrimony even with his main ally in the center, Arne Swabeck (1890-1986). Viewed in the light of Cannon's whole career—from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) on through the various splits of the 1940s and early 1950s—one appreciates that the political loss of so many comrades and collaborators took its toll. "It seems like it's always been my fate in politics to fall out with my close personal friends over political differences," Cannon said to an

interviewer late in life. “It makes an emotional as well as a political problem.” (797)

In biography, as in all historical writing, we inevitably view the importance of individuals and tendencies based on later events, outcomes unknowable to the actors in the earlier moments of their lives. There is a danger in looking back on Cannon’s career in the 1930s from the political heights he later achieved owing to his close collaboration with Trotsky in the struggle against Shachtman, Abern and James Burnham (1905-1987). This resulted in critical polemics carried out in 1939 and 1940, writings assembled in the books by Trotsky and by Cannon, which exposed the petty bourgeois nationalist orientation of Cannon’s main opponents and considerably strengthened Cannon’s position as the central leader of the SWP. That final rupture with Shachtman comes after the close of the present study.

Before then, Shachtman and Cannon had rapprochements on more than one occasion, including as late as 1938 when they united behind the formation of the Fourth International and the SWP. And in the early 1930s Shachtman arguably contributed as much as Cannon to the Trotskyist movement—and probably more when it came to the party’s newspapers and other publications, as Palmer allows. Trotsky, for his part, had immense respect for both principal leaders of the American Trotskyists. Wary of the threat of an unclarified split emerging between them, Trotsky criticized Cannon for the use of organizational methods to resolve political problems (“The hardest lesson I had to learn from Trotsky,” Cannon was later to say, “was to let organizational questions wait until the political issues were fully clarified”) (305).

Meanwhile, Trotsky criticized Shachtman in part because of the latter’s maneuvers among European comrades on his visits to the continent (274). “Comrade Shachtman’s behavior is extremely disturbing to me, and I cannot easily separate the American struggle from the international questions,” Trotsky wrote in a letter to Glotzer in 1932, while in another letter to American comrades he warned of Shachtman that “it is not easy to assume that one is right on the most important national questions if one is always wrong on the most important international ones” (308). Trotsky rebuffed attempts by Shachtman, Spector and Abern to solicit his approval in their fights with Cannon.

While Palmer offers plenty of examples of Shachtman’s cliquishness in the 1930s, indications of his future rightward course emerge only by the late 1930s. Together with Burnham and others, Shachtman had resisted Cannon’s and Trotsky’s repeated calls to prepare for the “exit” after the “entry” into the Socialist Party. Shachtman, it seems, had become attached to the left-liberal intellectual milieu that surrounded the SP. As for Burnham, the book reveals that he entertained the illusion that the Trotskyists could completely take over the SP, a party that, under Norman Thomas, was careening rapidly to the right in the lead-up to the Second World War—as was Burnham, it would turn out.

These issues were not yet fully clarified as late as 1938, when Palmer’s study ends. What does clearly emerge in Palmer’s book is that Cannon found his support in the proletarian wing of the CLA. His major base throughout was the worker-comrades of Minneapolis—the Dunne brothers (Vincent, Miles, and Grant), and Carl Skoglund, among others, part of a layer of militants who initially gravitated to Trotskyism, in Shachtman’s words, “thanks primarily to the fact that Trotsky’s views were sponsored by a [Communist] party leader who enjoyed the prestige and authority that Cannon had” (99).

One develops a deeper sympathy for the great challenges Cannon faced in the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in an isolated and scarcely unified movement, advancing under the combined threats of the Stalinists, the reactionary trade union bureaucracy and the American state. The difficulty was aggravated by personal hardship, especially in the “dog days” of the early 1930s. His wife and comrade, Rose Karsner (1890-1969), had a mental collapse, and the couple and their children lived in real poverty. Frequently plagued by stomach ulcers and facing difficulty paying for bus fares, utilities and food, Cannon resorted to appealing to relatives for charity, taking on boarders, and for a time, taking an outside job. Palmer includes examples of Cannon pleading to the party center for minimal amounts of money to carry on work. It was not always forthcoming.

There is some evidence of Cannon’s reputed alcoholism. But it seems his favored strategy of “escape” from the party center and its factionalism was to personally oversee work in the working class. Cannon, the former “freewheeling Wobbly” and son of a Kansas rail worker of Irish background, always felt at home on the road and among workers. We see Cannon’s famous flair for labor fights, and his limitless confidence in the American working class. He expended great efforts among the coal miners of Illinois in the early 1930s, in Minneapolis among truck drivers from 1934 on and among the maritime workers of California in the late 1930s. But Cannon’s presence for such work was not without cost. His absence left his rivals in the party center room to maneuver, and ultimately to adapt under the pressure of American liberalism, which was, in turn, adapting to Stalinism in the Popular Front era of the mid-1930s.

So Cannon was often “called back” to deal with political problems in the center, in the last instance by Trotsky, who, the text makes clear, was frequently exasperated with the CLA leadership and came, over the course of the decade, to depend on Cannon, not only for the work in the US but in the founding of the Fourth International. “I do not doubt that the situation on the Coast is critical and important,” Trotsky wrote in an appeal that Cannon leave California and attend the founding conference of the Fourth International in Paris. “[B]ut it is, nevertheless, a local situation, which tomorrow will be repeated in other parts of the States. The question in Europe has a universal character: it is possibly the last meeting before the war; the conferences will also give the American section reinforced authority for its action in California as elsewhere” (1130).

Cannon was aware of the threat of a parochialism among American comrades, including himself. “None of us are Internationalists in the real sense of the word, we only think we are,” he wrote in 1938. “In our hearts we tend to think of a stay in Europe as a period of absence from the work in the ‘movement,’ meaning our own back yard” (1129). Yet, as early as 1934 Cannon could warn against the conception that building an American organization was the central objective: “The building of new parties and the new International, which are inseparably bound together in a single task, are counterposed as separate tasks, and the building of national parties is put in the first order. … The international position of any party is today the primary test of its revolutionary character” (730).

Cannon was an extraordinary writer. He could tap the color and earthy humor of the American vernacular without hokey affectation, in a manner reminiscent of his fellow Midwesterner, Mark Twain. But his most potent writing was above all direct, evincing a capacity for seizing on the essential in a situation. One thinks of his Open Letter of 1953 that founded the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and began the long fight against Pabloite revisionism, which offloaded the leading role of the working class in revolution to various other agencies, including the Stalinist bureaucracy and Third World nationalist formations.

Palmer’s work brings some of that political prose to readers for the first time. In one example, Cannon sensed the adaptation to the trade union bureaucracy of a future leader of American Pabloism, Bert Cochran (1913-1984), warning the latter in 1936:

> Work in the center is the main school for the development of leading comrades. Experience in the field is necessary; in my opinion it is almost indispensable for the rounded education of a party leader. But an active comrade soon reaches the point where

> field work has nothing more to teach him until he has gone through a period of experience in the center where he has to focus his mind more and more on national and international questions and test himself out in collaboration with other comrades of the leading body… Field work too long protracted, tends to arrest political development of the individual rather than broaden it. This is doubly true of trade union field work. One becomes parochial-minded. He gets buried under a multitude of little things and postpones consideration of the most important. He loses perspective, sense of proportion and even in some cases a sense of humor, mistaking his irritation over a raft of petty annoyances for revolutionary indignation against the monstrosity of capitalism as a world system (1087-1088).

As Palmer notes, there was probably something autobiographical about these lines.

The strengths of Cannon and the American Trotskyists were on display in Minneapolis in 1934. This is one of the liveliest sections of the book, and it holds many tactical as well as political lessons for workers today. It is notable, for example, that Skoglund and the Dunnes promoted "rank-and-file sectorial committees … that cultivated solidarities across a previously fragmented workforce" (554). These were workers who won respect in their workplace, comrades who knew how to organize struggles with a class perspective—which was only made possible, as Cannon noted, by the grounding of their international perspective. The Minneapolis comrades, with Cannon's guiding hand, prevailed in what was then the most reactionary anti-union city in the country, defeating its fascistic Citizens Alliance. More than that, they fought off the Teamsters national union bureaucracy of Daniel Tobin, which was as hellbent as the Citizens Alliance on destroying the Trotskyists and the movement toward industrial unionism among the truck drivers.

The victory in Minneapolis deserves its stature as one of the great victories in the history of American labor, and we take special pride that it was led by the worker-comrades of the Trotskyist movement. But certain political problems arose that hold lessons still today. As Palmer correctly notes, there was a tendency, exhibited especially by Farrell Dobbs (1907-1983), to adapt to Farmer Laborism, a reformist third-party political formation that talked left and held the Minnesota governor's mansion in these years. Cannon's arrival in Minneapolis in 1934 helped steer the comrades toward a sharper class struggle perspective, which recognized that the strike "must be politically directed because it is confronted by the government at every turn" and in which "power, not diplomacy, would decide the issue" (604-605).

Yet, even though the struggle in Minneapolis developed as an industrial movement of the unorganized truckyard workers and long-haul drivers, and as an out-and-out rebellion against the AFL whose national bureaucracy made every effort to crush it, Cannon did not perceive that the great development of the industrial workers in the 1930s would take place *outside of and against* the old "House of Labor." Because of this, the American Trotskyists recognized too late the insurrectionary possibilities associated with the birth of the CIO, which was founded in the late autumn of 1935 under the leadership of John L. Lewis (1880-1969) of the United Mine Workers and Sidney Hillman (1887-1946) of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Leaders of the AFL had looked upon industrial workers with contempt—"trash at labor's door," in the words of one union president—and made no serious effort to organize the unorganized.

To some extent, Cannon's slowness may have arisen from the mechanical application of the lessons the old Wobbly had learned about "dual unionism" a generation earlier when the IWW's crusade against the AFL had failed to reach the broad masses of workers. But Palmer's research suggests that the very successes the Trotskyists enjoyed in *just two* regional AFL unions—the Teamsters in Minneapolis and the Sailors Union of the Pacific in San Francisco—contributed to a delayed recognition of the new dynamic. Indeed, even in the state where Trotskyism had the most influence, the Minnesota comrades in the late 1930s badly missed the explosive growth of the CIO in sections of the industrial working class, including among the machinists in Minneapolis and the iron miners of the Mesabi Range, as Palmer notes. Among those workers, the Stalinists had the initiative.

Behind this was a perspective, never fully worked out, that somehow the party would push the existing unions toward revolution. Cannon wrote, for example,

> The fight for trade union unity, the fight for a revolutionary labor movement, has to be expressed this moment, in this period, in the slogan, "Deeper into the A.F. of L. unions." We go where the masses are and win them for revolution … [I]f we win the masses of the workers we will have the movement and it is the movement that will make the revolution, not the label—and without the movement, represented by the workers in the trade unions, there is not going to be a revolution … [T]he only prerequisite for the creation of a progressive and militant kernel in the unions that can give them a program and push them into action is a revolutionary party (692-693).

Taken separately, the various assertions in this statement are true enough. It was necessary then, as it is now, to reach workers where they are. Yet Cannon's thought indicated an illusion that somehow the AFL unions could be taken over and made into instruments of revolution.

The worst manifestation of this tendency to adapt to the AFL came in 1937 and 1938, with the effort made by Bert Cochran and George Clarke (1913-1964) to cultivate Homer Martin (1901-1968), a right-wing bureaucrat in the early UAW. Martin was, Palmer writes, "committed to battling the Stalinists, but for very different reasons than were the Trotskyists" (1090). Cannon made some criticism of this in private letters to Cochran, but he tacitly supported it. The effort continued until, predictably enough, Martin pivoted and attacked the Trotskyists. The entire affair slowed the development of work among the autoworkers, who were emerging as the most crucial section of the American working class.

Another section of the book that warrants special attention is Palmer's treatment of what was called in the 1930s "the Negro question"—the double racial-class oppression of black workers in the era of Jim Crow segregation. In just 15 years the American comrades had moved far beyond the thinking of the old Socialist Party, which had consisted, on one hand, of an accommodation to the out-and-out racism of the AFL unions, associated with the likes of Victor Berger (1860-1929) of Milwaukee, and on the other the passive attitude that racial oppression would be resolved in the future after a socialist society had been achieved, the position of Eugene Debs (1855-1926).

The decisive factor in the shift was the Russian Revolution. The advances made by the Bolsheviks on "the national question," and the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky in the early Comintern, led to an insistence that the struggle against chauvinism was integral to the fight against capitalist exploitation. Therefore, the revolutionary party had to uphold the right of national self-determination for oppressed minorities. But the Leninist position, which viewed national self-determination as essentially a negative right to be championed by the workers' vanguard—Trotsky continued to adhere to this view in the 1930s—was distorted by the American Stalinists, who called for the formation of a black-majority nation-state, chiseled out of the very poorest, landlocked

and most rural parts of the American South. The Stalinists' plan had little appeal to black workers, especially in the northern cities. But their redirection of the workers' movement to fight against racial oppression certainly did—as for example in their defense of the Scottsboro Boys, black youth falsely accused of raping white girls in 1931.

Within this framework the American Trotskyists undertook a far-ranging discussion aimed at a differentiation from the Stalinists. Those involved included Cannon, Oehler, Shachtman, Glotzer, John G. Wright (1901-1956), and early black Trotskyists Simon Williamson and Ernest Rice McKinney (1886-1984). Palmer explains that both the Cannon and Shachtman factions agreed that "the struggle against racism in the United States necessarily had to emphasize equality and class struggle rather than nationhood and self-determination" (349), because, as Oehler pointed out, the Stalinist promotion of the Black Belt Nation took place "mainly in the north and in the industrial centers," implying that black workers should move back to the South and that the semi-agricultural laborer was "the decisive section" of the population (348).

Moreover, class divisions existed not only among whites, but among blacks. Thus Cannon, while initially supporting the right of self-determination, knew that "work among the Negro masses must from the very beginning be based on leadership by the Negro proletarian and not by the Negro petty bourgeoisie" (338), because black workers have "more reason than anybody to be a communist" (353). Nothing could be conceded to any other political force: "Communists must be the heralds of a genuine solidarity between the exploited workers of the white race and the doubly exploited Negroes," Cannon said (351). The party had as a special duty the organization and mobilization of white workers in the combat against racial oppression. Because, Cannon explained, in winning over black workers, "one act by white workers [was] worth more than one thousand arguments" (354).

Unfortunately, these discussions never concretized "into a coherently laid-out programmatic perspective," as Palmer writes, appearing as they did "at a time when many other developments … overwhelmed the Communist League of America" (378). The closest writing to a summation, Max Shachtman's *Communism and the Negro*, remained unpublished until 1973.

Another important section comes in Palmer's treatment of the Dewey Commission [3]. It reveals that Trotsky became increasingly—one might even say desperately—angry over the American Trotskyists' foot-dragging on the formation of the Commission, and what he perceived to be their concessions to American liberalism, then in the thrall of Stalinism. Trotsky repeatedly demanded that his defense be carried out in the working class and was outraged to learn that the CLA had made little effort to sell his pamphlet, *I Stake My Life*. He decried the "criminal thoughtlessness" of the American comrades (969) and called for a concentration "on mass work and not personal maneuvers with the liberals" (970). The focus of Trotsky's anger was George Novack (1905-1992), who functioned as a secretary in the formation of the Dewey Commission. It was at this point that Trotsky demanded Cannon return from California to New York to move things along. Cannon did so with some success, but one wonders why he did not oversee this crucial work from the beginning.

It is revealing that Trotsky, in his struggle to defend himself and the program of international socialism against Stalinist slanders and threats, came very close to accusing Novack of treachery. Novack later became one of the most vociferous opponents of the investigation of the assassination of Trotsky, carried out by the ICFI. He covered for individuals who turned out to be agents of the GPU, Stalin's murderous secret police—in effect, an accomplice after the fact. Palmer's book implicitly suggests a certain continuity in Novack's class orientation between these episodes: While Trotsky was living and urgently seeking to expose the Moscow frame-up trials by taking the fight into the working class, Novack's main concern was not to upset relations with the New York liberal milieu. After Trotsky's death, Novack opposed any investigation into the circumstances surrounding the assassination, even as the evidence piled up that the revolutionary's security detail, provided by the SWP, was riddled with agents.

One of those agents was Joseph Hansen (1910-1979), the longtime de facto leader of the SWP after Cannon's semi-retirement in the 1950s. Hansen was later revealed by Louis Budenz (1891-1972) to have been an agent of the GPU before Trotsky's murder. As for Hansen's career after the assassination, the Security and the Fourth International investigation later found documentation that he had secret meetings with the FBI, a liaison that was attended to personally by agency director J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972). There is, in fact, no evidence that Hansen—the only leading figure of the SWP not prosecuted under the Smith Act trials—ever broke off his contacts with the FBI, contacts that were unknown to the rest of the SWP leadership [4].

Hansen comes across as a dubious figure. Most of Palmer's information appears to come from Hansen's essay, "The Abern Clique." According to his own recounting, Hansen, then self-admittedly an Abern "faction fighter," was sent from Utah to San Francisco in late 1936, where he was given the editorship of the Sailor Union of the Pacific's newspaper, the *Seaman's Journal*. The "in" for this was provided by a union secretary, Norma Perry, who, it was believed, was a disgruntled member of the Communist Party. From there, Hansen soon went off to work as Trotsky's secretary in 1937. Palmer acknowledges that this series of events appears surprising:

> Thus Cannon, knowing full well that Hansen was an Abernite, nevertheless advocated for the young militant to be sent to Mexico to serve as one of Trotsky's trusted bodyguards and drivers, at a time when such jobs were both extremely important for Trotsky's safety and provided select American comrades with a privileged intimacy to the revolutionary movement's world leader (941).

Hansen's account of his origins and how he got to Mexico must be taken with a high degree of skepticism [5]. After all, this is an individual who spent the remainder of his career shielding known Stalinist agents involved in the plot to kill Trotsky. Yet, though Cannon understood the importance of protecting Trotsky—"*The defense of Trotsky's life at the present moment is a duty enjoined upon the labor movement in order to defend itself*," he wrote as early as 1934 (954)— he must have at least acquiesced in the decision to send Hansen to Mexico City, having known the latter for just a few months.

It is hoped that Palmer, professor of history emeritus at Trent University, in Peterborough, Ontario, will turn to this and other important subjects in his third volume. This will cover the final period of Cannon's life, from 1938 until his death in 1974 at the age of 84. Cannon's greatest challenges still lay ahead past 1938—as indeed they do for his biographer: His fight, alongside Trotsky, against the petty bourgeois faction led by Shachtman and Burnham in the SWP, waged as Washington prepared for World War II; the assassination of Trotsky in 1940; Cannon's prosecution and imprisonment under the Smith Act the same year, along with other leaders of the SWP, for opposing American imperialism's entry into the war; and Cannon's issuance of the Open Letter of 1953 and his founding of the ICFI that began the long "civil war" against Pabloite revisionism. Cannon's leadership in that struggle is indelible. Politically prepared by his collaboration with Trotsky against Shachtman, Cannon played a decisive role in preserving the continuity of Trotskyism—that is, genuine Marxism—a heritage that all sections of the ICFI still defend.

The final decades of Cannon's life provide a tragic coda to an

extraordinary political biography. Over the course of the 1950s, Cannon went into near political retirement, handing over actual political leadership of the SWP to Hansen, though Farrell Dobbs was nominally the party secretary. Cannon capitulated to Pabloism in the early 1960s amidst the SWP's embrace of the Cuban Revolution, a petty bourgeois nationalist revolution which the one-time leading party of Trotskyism now embraced as the work of "natural Marxists."

The fate of the SWP after Cannon's death would also require some consideration. Riddled with FBI agents arriving through the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the COINTELPRO program, the leadership of the SWP was taken over in the 1960s and 1970s by a group of students from Carleton College, a small college in Minnesota, headed by Jack Barnes (1940-). Over the following years Barnes and the SWP rejected Trotskyism. In the early 1980s, Barnes drove out the remaining cadre that had any connection to Cannon. That which today calls itself the Socialist Workers Party is the complete negation of the party Cannon was building in the quarter century between 1928 and 1953. It is a grotesque right-wing cult that, among other positions, supports Donald Trump and Israel's ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians.

But that volume has yet to be written. As for the present effort, there are, of course, weaknesses in a book dealing with so many complex subjects. Any history that deals with the 1930s, it seems to this reviewer, should capture something more of the period's drama and tragedy than the author manages. In his recounting, the global developments of the era—the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, the Moscow Trials, etc.—come in as a sort of backdrop in front of which Cannon and others perform their roles. Palmer's narrative does not sufficiently express how objective historic events work dynamically and reciprocally upon the actors. The "subject" is, so to speak, separated from the "object." Relatedly, Cannon himself does not quite "come to life" as a distinct personality in the way that some historic figures have been vividly depicted by their biographers—one thinks, for example, of Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography of Trotsky, *The Prophet* series.

To some extent the weaknesses emerge from the difficulties of Cannon's own career in the 1930s, as he struggled to develop a synthesis in the fight for Trotskyism out of episodic struggles, at the head of a fractious party, and in a vast and complicated country. And to some extent such weaknesses are inevitable with such voluminous research. This is a book that boasts the strengths of its own weakness, as it were. The immense detail comes at the expense of a more literary biography.

Nonetheless, Palmer deserves great credit for taking on his subject, Cannon, when the academic fraternity continues to operate within the old framework, established during the Cold War, that there was no left alternative to Stalinism—a lie that was promoted by the anti-communists and Stalinists alike. The immense amount of research found in its pages will be valuable for serious historians and radicalizing workers alike, as we seek guidance from the past to confront the immense challenges of the present. This is a volume deserving of careful study by Trotskyists and all those seeking an honest account of the interaction between the revolutionary upsurge of the American working class and the struggle for Marxism in the 1930s.

The first Trotskyist newspaper, The Militant, began publishing in October, 1928. In January 1929, Trotsky's 139-page "The Draft Program of the Communist International" was published with an introduction by Cannon. In 1930 and 1931, the CLA managed to publish eight pamphlets and one book by Trotsky (125-133).

The first public meetings of the American Trotskyists were held in New Haven and Philadelphia on December 21, and December 28, 1928, addressed by Cannon and Shachtman respectively. Cannon's meeting was disrupted by Stalinists. Such attacks became more violent. Two Trotskyist workers were murdered at a public "soapbox" protest on Seventh Street and Avenue A in Lower Manhattan on August 20, 1932. Their names were Michael Semen and Nick Krusiuk (94-95).

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Bert Hanman, a Stalinist who then joined the CLA for a brief period, gave testimony to the California Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities that he had "brought Charles Cornell and a Joe Hanson [sic] of Salt Lake City into the Fourth International." Cornell and Hansen were both present when Trotsky was killed. Hanman and Cornell left the Trotskyist movement soon after the assassination. See: https://archive.org/stream/reportjointfactf1943cali/reportjointfactf1943cali_djvu.txt

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