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# The Fourth International and the Debate on the National Question in Europe (1941–1946)

Velia Sabrina Luparello 

*The theme of this article is the debate of the Fourth International on “the national question” in Europe during the Second World War. Through the analysis of documents and articles published throughout this period by three of its sections (German, American and British), it was possible to reconstruct the different perspectives regarding the political tasks of the period, the role of the democratic demands and the relationship between the proletarian revolution and the national liberation. The main hypothesis of this work is that the political perspective of the direction of the Fourth International on the European process was influenced by the prospect that, even after the fascist defeat, there would not be a revival of bourgeois democracy, and therefore, the socialist revolution was latent. This approach involved not only political but also practical consequences for the young organization at the time to get involved into the mass movements and the working class.*

*Keywords:* Fourth International; Europe; Trotskyism; Second World War

The foundation of the Fourth International in September of 1938 can be considered one of the most important consequences of the consolidation of the Stalinist policy, reflected in, among other things, the control of the Communist International during the decade of 1930. The Trotskyists who were members of the new organization took as a theoretical basis two works of Leon Trotsky: *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*<sup>1</sup> and the *Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the World Proletarian Revolution*.<sup>2</sup> In general terms, it was based on the assertion that the capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, *El Programa de Transición: La agonía mortal del capitalismo y las tareas de la IV Internacional* (Bogotá: Pluma, 1973 [1938]).

<sup>2</sup> Leon Trotsky, The Manifesto was adopted by the IV International Emergency Conference, 19–26 May 1940, New York. Published by *Socialist Appeal*, 19 June 1940.

system was in its terminal phase and therefore the Second World War was a continuation and deepening of the imperialist policy of division of markets between the bourgeoisies of the great powers launched in 1914. The class contradictions would be aggravated, leading to the imposition of fascist totalitarian regimes in order to keep the bourgeois rule. The period was characterized as pre-revolutionary.

According to this scenario, the mobilization of the masses and the proletariat, under the direction of its revolutionary vanguard, was presented as the fundamental task for the Trotskyism. The connection between the two would be given by a series of transitional demands that would connect the demands of daily life to the program of the socialist revolution. So Trotskyism was faced with the challenge of developing a revolutionary party in the context of the European war. The movement was not in its best shape. The Asian sections had found themselves involved in the conflicts of independence processes, and the European decimated and banned from political life. The leadership of the Fourth International fell on the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the US. The headquarters of the General Secretariat were transferred to New York during September 1939, at the beginning of the war. From that time, all of the resolutions taken by the SWP were the positions to be taken by the other organizations.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the central argument from the end of 1941 and up to 1946 concerned the situation in Europe during the war and the prospects of a proletarian revolution.

This article aims to make a contribution to the history of European Trotskyism and the Fourth International during the tumultuous times of Second World War. Discussion of the national question in Europe was one of the most relevant issues at the time for this international organization. The aim of this paper, which is a partial result of my current History PhD research, is to show that the political perspective of the direction of the Fourth International on the European process was influenced by the prospect that, even after the fascist defeat and liberation, there would not be a revival of bourgeois democracy after the war, and therefore, the socialist revolution was latent. This approach involved not only political but also practical consequences for the young organization at the time getting involved in mass movements and the working classes.

For the reconstruction of this debate it was necessary to study the documents of various groups, such as the exiled German comrades' position, the SWP's replies to it and Ted Grant's contributions. In the first part of this article I will address the document 'Three Thesis on the European situation and the political tasks', written by exiled members of the German section of the Fourth International. Then I will continue with the SWP's internal discussion about the European situation. Finally, I will develop the British section's perspective on *democratic revolution/bourgeois democratic counter-revolution* and national liberation. Nevertheless, it is important to say that another of the groups involved in this argument was the French section, through the European

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *War and the International: History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1937-49* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), p. 169.

Provisional Secretariat documents (Marcel Hic's position actually). However, this cannot be included owing to lack of space.

### **The Position of German Trotskyism in Exile**

The debate within the Trotskyism began with the document 'Three theses on the European situation and the political tasks', written by members of the *Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands* (IKD) in November 1941 and published in Fourth International in December 1942. They analyzed three aspects of the European reality: the economic situation in Europe since the beginning of the war and its consequences; the characterization of the Resistance Movement; and the political tasks for the revolutionary militants.

In the economic aspect they argued that humanity was living the agony and death of the capitalist system. They described the war as a long-term conflict and as a continuation of the First World War, which further enhanced and intensified the concentration of capital in the hands of the ruling classes, fueling the differences of class, and at the same time, there were changing economic, productive and geopolitical structures at global level. This new structure was materialized in the prisons and the ghettos, forced labor and prisoners of war, which were not considered as a result of the war and the fascist ideology, but as new forms of economic exploitation that would lead to the development of a 'modern State of slavery'. In addition, the overproduction in the arms industry of the main warring countries (Germany, the UK and USA) generated an imbalance with respect to the production of consumer goods and a reduction in the living standards of populations, not only in Europe and the US, but also in the colonies and of those countries that maintained trade relations with them. The stoppage in the growth of the productive forces, and the difficulties of increasing production and wealth were seen by the IKD as symptoms of the disintegration of the economy and of the capitalist world.<sup>4</sup>

This picture is complemented by the analysis of the political situation in the countries occupied by fascism, which was characterized by the destruction of the workers' parties and anti-fascists bourgeois parties. All organizations of any kind (trade unions, cultural and even churches) were under fascist control and/or were reconfigured according to their rules. Even the national bourgeoisies were suffering the effect of the 'Aryanization'. In this context of disarticulation of the class organizations, the struggle against the occupation had to find another way out. The massification of the Resistance under the slogan of national liberation as a binder, and the participation of the Trotskyist groups in it, was their proposal. The detailed description of the social composition of the Resistance reinforced this last point. According to the German group, it included all of the classes and social strata (workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals, students and clergy). All

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<sup>4</sup> Group of European Comrades, 'The National Question in Europe. Three Theses on the European Situation and the political tasks', *Fourth International*, III:12 (December 1942), p. 370.

were considered victims of the fascist repression without distinction of any kind, for Nazi Germany was regarded as the main enemy of the people.<sup>5</sup>

The German Trotskyists concluded that in occupied Europe there was no workers' organization which could act freely against the fascism and, therefore, was capable of becoming a revolutionary party as soon as possible. The left groups that existed were isolated from each other, in conditions of illegality, and did not have the material means to carry out a policy of mass agitation. The construction of the party was seen as the fundamental task, but at the same time, they recognized that the objective and subjective conditions could not be worse for carrying this out:

The gulf, which up to the moment of revolution exists between on the one hand the program of socialist revolution and the ripeness of the objective conditions, and on the other hand the consciousness of the masses and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard, is today especially wide. This gulf, can be bridged only by a system of *transitional demands*, but the world situation and the peculiar conditions in Europe make such a system a matter of life and death in the near future.<sup>6</sup>

The 'advantage' of the European situation was the impetus it gave to the masses in the struggle for national liberation, paving the way for more democratic demands. The importance of the connection of this demand with a program of transition to socialism lay in the fact that, if it was not capitalized by the Trotskyist groups, it could be used by the chauvinistic or bourgeois sectors for their own interests. On the other hand, they considered that the transitional stage of fascism to the dictatorship of the proletariat would be a 'democratic revolution', understood as the (re) conquest of the democratic rights (freedom of the press, the right to strike, freedom of association and self-determination of peoples) lost under totalitarian regimes.

Thus, the contradiction between the plight of the revolutionary groups and the economic characterization (which denied the possibilities of stabilization of any bourgeois-democratic regime) was settled simply by the reaffirmation of the Transitional Program, which on the basis of democratic demands would provide a road map for the European proletariat, pressed by the objective conditions.

#### *The Criticism of the 'Three Theses' by the SWP*

From this moment on, the debate on the national question came to the fore in the discussions within the Fourth International, and over the years would rise a virulent controversy about the prospects of the post-war period. The differences from 'the Three Theses' came out of certain members of the SWP, such as Felix Morrow, Albert Goldman and Jean Van Heijenoort, others of the Revolutionary Communist Party, such as Ted Grant, and even European Trotskyists who were exiled in London at that time. They indicated that the criticisms raised by the Germans was seriously flawed in several aspects: the characterization of the present historical

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 372.

stage; the vision (distorted, according to some) of the situation of the Resistance Movement and of the European workers' movement; the prioritisation of the battle for national liberation with regard to the class struggle; and the idea of the 'democratic revolution' as a transitional phase from fascism to socialism.

After the publication of 'The Three Theses on the European situation' in *Fourth International*, Jean Van Heijenoort wrote several articles in the course of 1942 ('Europe Under the Iron Heel' in February, 'The National Question in Europe' in September and 'Revolutionary Tasks under the Nazi Boot' in November) with the intention of giving an overview of the European situation as a trigger for the discussion inside the SWP. Although he moved sharply away from the position of the Germans Trotskyists, he expressed reservations about the characterization of the Resistance Movement. In October of that year, the official position of the SWP, without any reference to the Three Theses, stated that the aspirations of national liberation of the masses had great revolutionary potential, but it should not be used in a way that could serve the interests of imperialism. Therefore, the main task of the workers of occupied Europe was to put themselves at the top of the insurgent movement and fight for the reorganization of European socialism. Within this mass of workers, the SWP resolution highlighted the German proletariat as the decisive element of the socialist revolution. In order to achieve this task, it was necessary to adopt a unifying slogan such as 'The Socialist United States of Europe'. All of the others (including the National Liberation slogan) should be subordinated to it.<sup>7</sup>

It was Felix Morrow who made it clear in his document 'Our Differences with the Three Theses'<sup>8</sup> that the differences with the German comrades were due to a difference in political perspectives on the revolution. In first difference lay in the relationship between the slogans of 'National Liberation' and 'Socialist United States of Europe'. Morrow stated that these should not be submitted independently of one another, but as part of the same struggle. Otherwise the slogan 'National Liberation' would degenerate into a mere nationalism at the service of any of the imperialist camps in war. The national oppression in Europe would not end with the Nazi defeat but it would be renewed by the arrival of the Allies with the aim of avoiding the revolution, although at this time Morrow does not specify whether its methods and objectives would be the same as those of Nazism.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Morrow stated that the new national feeling that was emerging, contrary to what is written in the 'Three Thesis', exacerbated the class differences between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In this way, an instrument that was originally in favor of the groups of the ruling classes now had the potential to play an essential role in the advance of the consciousness of the proletariat, as long as it was explained and emphasized by the party vanguard.

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<sup>7</sup> SWP National Committee, 'The National Question and Europe', *Fourth International*, III:10 (October 1942), p. 319.

<sup>8</sup> Felix Morrow, 'Our Differences with the Three Theses', *Fourth International*, III:12 (December 1942), pp. 372-374.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

The postulate of the second Thesis regarded the struggle for national liberation as the primary goal. It appeared, according to Morrow, an erroneous characterization of Resistance and of the workers' organizations. Morrow was in total disagreement with the idea of the massification of the Resistance and lack of differentiation of social classes and, above all, with the equalization of the proletariat and the peasantry with the various sectors of the bourgeoisie in the fight against the Nazis. In response, he returned to the article written by Jean Van Heijenoort (under the alias of Marc Loris) in September 1942, 'The National Question in Europe', in which the author clarified that, although the anti-Nazi resistance was a mass movement, if you looked at its core, you met with workers, primarily, and peasants (the latter especially in central and southeastern Europe). With regard to the bourgeoisie, it had strengthened ties with Nazism (especially the great industrial and financial bourgeoisie) in order to maintain their privileges and profits in the face of the 'Communist threat'.<sup>10</sup> For its part, the petty bourgeoisie had been adversely affected by the fascist regimes, but at the same time constituted a large spectrum of collaborators to a greater or lesser extent. At one end the most reactionary chauvinist groups, such as the Gaullists, retired military personnel and officials, feared both the Nazis and the mass movements. At the other extreme were the poorest layers of the petty bourgeoisie, who were looking for a way out of their situation and looked with a certain sympathy to communism, although they maintained some conservatism. Professionals, intellectuals, young people, students and writers were within this group.

With regard to the labor movement, the document of the 'Three Theses' posited it as virtually non-existent. Therefore it was necessary to find another outlet. This other outlet would be, according to Morrow, the subordination of the proletarian struggle to the struggle for national liberation, which generated, in practice, opposition to or the replacement of one by the other. This approach would be mistaken since it did not consider that the liberation movements were, in large part, under the leadership of the organizations and groups of workers.<sup>11</sup>

For his part, Albert Goldman (writing under the name of M. Morrison) directed his reply both to the authors of the 'Three Theses' and to Jean Van Heijenoort. Following the official line of the SWP, his criticism focused on the meaning that should be given to the slogan of National Liberation in Europe. Making a parallel with the struggles against colonialism in China and India, he wondered whether the authors were concerned with the right of peoples to self-determination in the same way. The support of the struggles of this kind on the part of the Fourth International was based on the idea of, on the one hand, weakening imperialism, but at the same time, accelerated growth of the productive forces of the oppressed countries. In that case, all struggle for national independence (even that led by bourgeois elements) should be supported by the Marxism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marc Loris, 'The National Question in Europe', *Fourth International*, III:9 (September 1942), p. 265.

<sup>11</sup> Morrow, 'Our Differences with the Three Theses', op. cit., p. 373.

<sup>12</sup> M. Morrison, 'The Central Slogan for Occupied Europe', *Fourth International*, IV:1 (January 1943), pp. 18-19.

For the European case, said Goldman, it was almost impossible to separate the struggles of the occupied countries of the inter-imperialist conflict. In fact, the resistance of the bourgeoisie of the countries of Europe was part of the inter-imperialist conflict. Support for national liberation in this context meant to take the side of one of the capitalists, which Trotskyists refused to do. The distinction that Goldman emphasized was between the countries in which the struggle for national liberation could be regarded as being independent of the imperialist war (as in the case of China and India) and those where the struggle of the bourgeoisie against German imperialism was inseparable from the inter-imperialist conflict.

With regard to the relationship of the slogans ‘National Liberation’ and ‘Socialist United States of Europe’, the tactic of using the first without the second would only be correct in the case of a definitive victory of Hitler, which in 1943 seemed unlikely. According to Goldman, there were objective conditions to achieving unification of the continent under the proletarian power, and therefore:

At the present moment, in the occupied countries we must concentrate on three things. We must refuse to support or participate in any way in the imperialist war; we must stand out as the champion of national freedom; we must emphasize the necessity of socialism as the solution to the problem confronting the European masses. Insofar as one slogan is capable of indicating these manifold tasks, the slogan of the Socialist United States of Europe best serves that purpose.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Majority and the Minority of the SWP on the National Question Debate**

The debate on the national question in Europe extended from the end of 1941 until a few months after the war ended in 1945. It is important to note that, while on the one hand, the political line that was marked for the Fourth International was that of the Transition Program and its forecasts on the decadence of capitalism, there was no uniform position among the critics of the ‘Three Theses’. The discussion had high moments and continued its course in parallel with the start of another debate in the SWP, from which it produced the formation of a minority within the party (integrated by Felix Morrow, Jean Van Heijenoort and Albert Goldman who until this time had rather dissimilar positions).

At the start of the party plenum in October 1943, we can distinguish two clearly opposed positions: a majority, headed by James Cannon; and a minority represented by Felix Morrow, Albert Goldman and Jean Van Heijenoort. The National Committee of the SWP held a four day plenum in New York from 29 October to 1 November 1943. It was during this meeting that the tactical differences between the Morrow–Goldman–Heijenoort minority and the majority led by James Cannon came to the surface. The original draft resolutions focused on what was described as ‘the four major processes of historical significance’:

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.



These are: (1) the downfall of Mussolini and the collapse of Italian fascism, signaling the beginning of the Italian and consequently, the European revolution; (2) the growing preponderance of Anglo-American military power over that of the Axis camp, which has already exposed Wall Street's aspirations to replace Nazi Germany as master and oppressor of Europe and thrown into bold relief the counter-revolutionary role of American imperialism on the world arena; (3) the colossal victories of the Red Army; (4) the formal dissolution of the Comintern.<sup>14</sup>

The collapse of the fascist regime in Italy was the first sign, according to the majority, that the beginning of the proletarian revolution was imminent. The bourgeoisie had played his last card with the imposition of totalitarian dictatorships that now were in crisis and that were not able to keep the class conflicts at bay. The wave of strikes in North Italian cities in March 1943, and the vast demonstrations of the masses after the deposition of Mussolini, expressed the revolutionary spirit of the people and their struggle for national liberation. The reaction to this situation was the alliance of Badoglio with the Allies, at the same time as the occupation of the North by the Nazis.

While the resolution of the SWP plenum recognized that, owing to the conditions imposed by the fascist regime, the Italian workers were not organized in workers' parties, it celebrated their self-organization and resistance against the invaders and the local bourgeoisie. However, they warned of the danger of a legal resurgence of the Communists and reformists who could take on a direction role for the disoriented masses. The resolution stated that 'the Axis and Allies armies are now, each in their own way, striving to finish the work of strangling the revolution'.<sup>15</sup> The only way for the Italian revolution to happen was through the eruption of revolutionary processes in the rest of the continent, especially in Germany.

The SWP majority perspective about the future of bourgeois democracy was intimately linked to this interpretation of the Italian events, in addition to what is stipulated in the Program of Transition. The resolution stated emphatically that:

The decay of capitalism and the acuteness of class conflicts forbid another extended period of bourgeois democracy for war-torn Europe. While interim bourgeois-democratic regimes may be set up here and there as by-products of uncompleted revolutionary movements, they must by their very nature prove unstable and short-lived. They must either give way before the conquest of power by the revolutionary workers or the military-police dictatorship of the capitalist counterrevolution.<sup>16</sup>

The emphasis on the counterrevolutionary role of US imperialism outlined in point (2) of the resolution, was consistent with the statement of the absence or short life of bourgeois democracy after the fall of fascism. That is to say that the methods

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<sup>14</sup> National Committee of the SWP, 'Perspectives and Tasks of the Coming European Revolution: Resolution Adopted by the Fifteenth Anniversary Plenum of the Socialist Workers Party (2 November 1943)', *Fourth International*, 4:11 (December 1943), p. 329.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

that the US would use to maintain the domination of Europe would be practically identical to those of the totalitarian dictatorships.

Europe, today enslaved by the Nazis, will tomorrow be overrun by equally predatory Anglo-American imperialism. By their attempts to replace the Nazis as masters of Europe the Allied imperialists will there by transfer to themselves all the consequences which prevented Hitler from 'pacifying' the continent.<sup>17</sup>

This invasion could only feed the hatred of the masses toward the oppressors and, therefore, to harden the Resistance and the struggle for national liberation. The fraternization between the European workers and soldiers of the occupying forces became a necessity on the road to revolution. In view of that purpose, according to the resolution of the SWP, the counterrevolutionary role of the US would be given by its alliance with the more conservative sectors of what was left of the capitalist Europe, such as the Vatican and some monarchies. In this sense, and in the context of the great revolutionary effervescence of the peoples, 'Roosevelt and Churchill understand that it is not in the cards to establish stable "democratic" capitalist governments in Europe today'.<sup>18</sup> The idea behind this quotation, developed later in the document, was that, given the possibility of freedom of expression and of democratic rights, the European working class would not take long to organize their revolutionary parties and overthrow the oppressors. Therefore, from the point of view of the ruling class, the elections were limited to two: 'Franco-type government' or the threat of the socialist revolution.

It is important to remember the characterization defended by the majority on the domination of the US over Europe because, on the one hand, it was one of the points of further discussion with the minority; and on the other, even more relevant, this analysis of the policies pursued by Washington was a determining factor for the political conclusions and tactics that the party should make. In others words, this topic was deeply related to the prospects for bourgeois democracy, and thus the continuity or the collapse of the capitalist system. Morrow was no stranger to that problem and, in part, his vision of the counterrevolutionary role of US imperialism (which in itself was not being questioned) was going to prove it.

The last issue the resolution referred to was the implications of the victories of the USSR, on the basis of the consideration that this was a degenerated workers' state in contradiction to the imperialist world of the West. On the other hand, the growth of its influence as a result of the military victories and the growth of the communist parties around the globe, the Allies would be, according to the resolution, scared more than emboldened. The basis of the perspective on the USSR was that, in spite of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the counter-revolutionary policies (carried out not only at that time, but also revolutionary during the Spanish Revolution of 1936),

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

Stalin's policy, bankrupt through and through, consists in seeking a middle way between these two fundamental alternatives. On one hand, he sets up 'Free Germany' and 'Free Poland' Committees and supports the Yugoslav Partisans and similar movements as counter-weights to Anglo-American influence. ... But Stalin's attempts to find a middle course are doomed to failure. Either the socialist revolution will triumph throughout Europe or the helpless continent will become the victim and vassal of Anglo-American imperialism. Either the Soviet Union will secure itself in alliance with the victorious European proletariat or it will be eventually conquered and destroyed by the imperialists. There are no other alternatives.<sup>19</sup>

Although there existed the possibility that the Kremlin could conduct a treacherous policy of alliance with the imperialists against the European revolutionary movement, at the same time, the majority of the SWP emphasized the difference between the chances of intervention that Stalinism had in the Spanish case (for being a revolution in isolation, in the boundaries of Europe, etc.) and those of the current scenario of European revolution. A revolution that starts in any country (as in Italy) will quickly spread beyond the national borders and assume continental dimensions. It can hardly be threatened by any bureaucracy or imperialist power. These maneuvers were manifested at that time in the Italian process and, therefore, the fight against the false policies of Stalinism was one of the most important tasks to be fulfilled by the revolutionary vanguard in Europe and in the rest of the world.

The vision of the SWP majority did not conceive as a real possibility a peaceful settlement between the US and the USSR. The end of the bureaucratic soviet caste was next in any case, beyond the immense membership growth of the communist parties and their leading role in the Resistance Movement. This was seen as a potential threat to the revolution, it is true, but, as we shall see below, it was not of the gravity manifested by Morrow in his criticism of the resolutions of the October plenum.

Felix Morrow was in total disagreement on the position taken by the majority, so he wrote the article 'The First Phase of the Coming European Revolution: A Criticism of the International Resolution of the [October 1943] Fifteenth Anniversary Plenum', in which summarized the differences between the Morrow-Morrison amendments and the resolution:

- (1) That the draft resolution erred in excluding the possibility of the use of bourgeois-democratic methods by the European bourgeoisie and its American imperialist masters; they would in all probability attempt to stem the European revolution not only by the use of military and fascist dictatorships but also where necessary by the use of bourgeois democracy.
- (2) That the draft resolution erred in minimizing the Stalinist danger; we must recognize that the victories of the Red Army have temporarily strengthened the prestige

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

of Stalinism; and we must, therefore, include in the resolution a warning of the very real danger of Stalinism to the European revolution.<sup>20</sup>

The estimate of the rhythm of the revolutionary process was fundamental for the definition of the tactics and strategies that the revolutionary party would follow. Morrow's position on this topic was one of the most important criticisms of the political position of the SWP majority. The latter claimed the imminent outbreak of a revolutionary situation immediately after the fall of fascism in Europe, which would mean the collapse of the capitalist system and the bourgeois representative democracy. The establishment of the Socialist United States of Europe was understood as a linear process. Since this does not admit the possibility of a restoration or strengthening of capitalism even temporarily, there was no conception of a revolution with phases of advances and setbacks. Contrary to what was claimed by some members of the majority, the minority did not deny the possibility of a socialist revolution at the end of the war. The disagreement was concerning to the time frame in which this process would happen and the role of the democratic demands.

The minority recognized the slowness of the European processes and the possibility of a period in which the bourgeois-democratic regimes still existed (although unstable and short-lived). According to them the revolutionary tactic in this context was to demand more democracy, that is to say, to expose the limitations with which the representative system was conceived to demonstrate in practice that the real democracy was that built by the workers through direct participation and decision-making in their own class organs of government: the workers' committees.

Morrow's group stated that the bourgeoisie, in order to avoid the development of a revolution at any cost, would prefer domination methods that were different from those used by the Nazis during the war. These new methods were defined mainly by the strengthening of the representative democracy in each country, which would be supported economically and politically by the western capitalist powers embodied in the US and the UK.

Towards the end of the Second World War the US was emerging as the leading economic power. The definition of its policy regarding to the global situation and particularly that in Europe, was one of the most important issues in the discussions within the SWP. The majority's perspective took certain specific events of the last years of the war as milestones that would change the international scene in favor of the European revolution. The fall of Mussolini and the collapse of Italian fascism meant the beginning of the revolution in Italy, spreading to the rest of the continent. The rise of the military power of the US was considered as a replacement of German imperialism by American, with clear intentions to subjugate and break Europe apart. Finally, the victories of the Red Army in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Comintern

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<sup>20</sup> Felix Morrow, 'The First Phase of the Coming European Revolution: A Criticism of the International Resolution of the Fifteenth Anniversary Plenum' (December 1943), *Fourth International*, 5:12 (December 1944), p. 370.

generated expectations on the role that the Soviet Union would play in the first stage of the revolution.<sup>21</sup>

Leon Trotsky, on the contrary, already in 1930 had referred to the possibility of the restoration of the bourgeois democracy in Italy after the fall of fascism. However, he did not consider that democratic regime as a result of a bourgeois revolution (like the French Revolution, for example), but as a consequence of the failure of the proletarian revolution owing to several factors (political immaturity of the working class, a crisis of working-class leadership, the role of the communist and reformist parties, etc.), as in the case of the Weimar Republic, which had not been the embodiment of the German proletarian revolution, but a symptom of the stabilization of the bourgeois regime. On the ruins of fascism, there would be set up a transitional state based on parliamentary and democratic reforms. Thus, in the Italian case, the possibility of a *bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution* would be the outcome of the defeat of the working class, on the one hand, and of the collapse of fascism (in part owing to that same battle against the proletariat).<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that the chances that a bourgeois revolution would take place were denied both by Trotsky and by the minority of the SWP. During the height of the fascist regimes in Europe the bourgeoisie had not been affected as a ruling class, in fact, it was a key contributor to the survival of totalitarian states and their material bases of domination remained intact. It would be contradictory to its own class interests to erect a revolution against those regimes. That is why Trotsky spoke about a 'bourgeois democratic counter-revolution' intended to prevent the proletarian revolution.

According to the SWP majority, the counterrevolutionary wave would be set in motion by the Allies, particularly by the US, who would conquer Europe and would fight for the persistence of capitalism through military force. Based on this vision, the document of the Fifteenth Plenum (November 1943) established that 'Europe, today enslaved by the Nazis, will tomorrow be overrun by equally predatory Anglo-American imperialism'.<sup>23</sup> This new enslavement to the self-determination of the peoples of the old continent would revive the feelings of national liberation of the masses to get rid of the invaders, which would be merged with the struggle against their local ruling classes. This situation would give an unstoppable impulse to the proletarian revolution.

On the other hand, the minority stated that the policy of the imperialism in Europe, presented in a very different way to that of the Nazis to the masses and immediately improving their standard of life, would have political consequences. In first place, the army would not be considered as an invader. Secondly, their intervention in order to maintain the bourgeois governments would strengthen the position of the local ruling classes. These new local regimes would be distinguished from the previous ones

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<sup>21</sup> SWP National Committee, op. cit., p. 329.

<sup>22</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'Letter on the Italian Revolution' (14 May 1930), *New Internationalist*, 10:7 (July 1944), pp. 215–218.

<sup>23</sup> SWP National Committee, op. cit., p. 331.

because they would not base their power completely on the use of weapons, but would complement it with a series of democratic reforms, such as periodic elections, in order to achieve the acceptance of the people.

### **The Perspectives of the British Section and the Bourgeois-Democratic Counter-Revolution**

At the beginning of 1944, the International Executive Committee sent Sherry Mangan to take care of the situation in the UK. The activity of the British Section of the Fourth International, the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), was poor and lacked organization. The envoy achieved the celebration of a National Conference with the goal of merging the RSL with the Workers International League (WIL), which had experienced some development in the trade unions in the region. To convince the WIL to be part of the Fourth International, the leadership of the SWP pressured the RSL to achieve an internal regrouping and merge with the WIL to shape the British Section of the Fourth International. The merger of the two groups in 1944 resulted in the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), in which the former members of the WIL had a majority. Jock Haston was elected as General Secretary of the RCP and Ted Grant as Political Secretary; they both belonged to WIL.

The European situation and the policies followed by the communist parties and the Allies generated in the RCP a very different approach to that of the Fourth International. The main documents of the SWP, since it became the seat of the Secretariat of the Fourth International, circulated within the RCP, but owing to external factors,<sup>24</sup> articles of discussion of Felix Morrow and Jean Van Heijenoort were published out of season in internal bulletins and in the party press. This meant that the perspective on the post-war period of the CPR was not the result of the debate within the SWP, but a conclusion based on their own observation and analysis since 1945. Once the positions of the minority of the SWP were met, the Political Bureau of the English Section expressed its support for them, both because of its political perspective and owing to the attitude that the leadership of the SWP took in the course of the debate.

Ted Grant deepened the criticism of the 'democratic transition' proposed by a sector of the German Section of the Fourth International (IKD), wondering what differentiated the 'democratic revolution' from a traditional regime of bourgeois democracy. The answer was, according to Grant, in the confusion and equivalence of the members of the IKD between the *bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution* of the period of decline of the bourgeoisie (i.e. the present moment to Grant) with the

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<sup>24</sup> The course of this debate in the SWP was marked by the 'Minneapolis case' and the subsequent imprisonment of the 18 accused. The sentence was 16 months starting on 31 December 1943. Twelve of the accused were released before their time for good behaviour on 24 January 1945 (James Cannon, *The Struggle for Socialism in the 'American Century': Writings & Speeches, 1945-1947* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), p. 423). Thus, the circulation of documents of the minority written for the October 1943 plenum, and Morrow's article 'The First Phase of the coming European Revolution' of December of the same year, was limited only to the members of the National Committee.

*democratic revolution* from the time of its peak (as was the French Revolution). And he added

However, they land themselves in the camp of Stalinist theory, simply because they have not understood, or have forgotten, the social content of the 'democratic' revolution: the creation of the national state; the overthrow of feudalism and the introduction of bourgeois relations; the separation of Church from State; the agrarian revolution.<sup>25</sup>

The democratic demands which could be claimed were part of a set of transitional demands in pursuit of socialism, not determinants of the nature of the revolution that workers should create. An item to highlight in Grant's article is the recognition of the possibility of a restoration of bourgeois democracy in the future. That is to say, he did not exclude from his analysis that during a long or short period of time parliamentary democracy would exist in Europe. In fact, he stated that this process was already taking shape in France and Italy (and this was true, bearing in mind that the article analyzed was released in October 1945). This document also showed his disagreement with the idea that the Anglo-American imperialism would resort to the same domination methods as German fascism. It was not a *democratic revolution*, but the means used by the bourgeoisie (*bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution*) in the fight to prevent the proletarian revolution. From this, he concluded emphatically that

In reality, the position in Europe arising out of the collapse of capitalism and the aftermath of war is that the *most favorable* objective conditions are created for the victory of the proletarian revolution. All the conditions laid down by Lenin are present: loss of confidence and uncertainty of the ruling class, vacillation and discontent of the petty bourgeoisie, readiness of the discontented working class to make the most heroic sacrifices in order to overthrow the capitalists. All that is lacking is the subjective condition—the revolutionary party.<sup>26</sup>

Although up until 1945 there were no significant disagreements on political issues between the SWP and the RCP, during the post-war period, the English Trotskyists began to make their own analysis of the European situation, which was extremely critical of the political positions taken by the leadership of the SWP, and particularly with James Cannon and Pierre Frank regarding to organizational matters of the Fourth International. The new perspective of the RCP was trying to adapt to the changes in the world, which were far from the predictions of the Transition Program. The betrayal of the Communist and Socialist Parties, the European reconstruction and the growth of the power of the USSR in Eastern Europe were the factors that led them to the recognition that the political preconditions for the strengthening of the capitalist system existed, and that they should act accordingly, updating their analysis. The point of departure was the rejection of the notion that a post-war economic

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<sup>25</sup> Ted Grant, 'The Character of the European Revolution: A Reply to Some Comrades of the IKD', *Fourth International*, 6:3 (March 1946), p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.



depression automatically would lead to the emergence of right-wing regimes. The analysis of Grant of the Italian process claimed that the subjective conditions for revolution were not present yet. All of the actions carried out by the Italian workers after Mussolini's defeat were instinctive and almost automatic. At the same time, Grant warned about the betrayal of the Communist and Socialist Parties and their tendency to lead the proletarian struggle in the channels of bourgeois democracy.

The prospect of the leaders of the RCP came almost in its entirety to the definitions of the Morrow–Goldman–Heijenoort group, which, since 1946, had been identified as correct and supported by the English comrades. However, while on the bottom line the analyses of Morrow and Ted Grant were substantially identical, there was a difference of emphasis between them. While the minority of the SWP stated that this was a period of 'democracy' or 'democratic revolution' in Europe after the war, the RCP took up the concept of 'bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution' developed by Trotsky in his letter to the Italian comrades of 1930. For Grant, in agreement with Morrow, this meant that the bourgeoisie would not resort to totalitarian dictatorships, but its shift toward democratic regimes would be accompanied by the manipulation of the Stalinists and reformists. This strategy was not a democratic revolution; on the contrary, it was a preventive counter-revolution against the proletariat. So the first stages of the revolutionary struggles in Europe would end up, probably, in a period of Popular Front governments.<sup>27</sup>

The first opportunity for the RCP to challenge the predictions of the majority of the SWP and the International Secretariat was given during a pre-conference held in April 1946 Paris. However, their positions were not reflected in the final resolution. In addition to negating any possibility of a period of bourgeois democracy in the future, the resolution reinforced the proposal of Pierre Frank about the implementation of Bonapartist regimes in Europe. It also rejected that the USSR had emerged stronger from the war. Thus, while the differences between the CPR and the International Secretariat were deepened, there were not limited to the question of the future of bourgeois democracy and the nature of the economic boom. To question Trotsky's perspectives on the post-war period implied a re-evaluation of all factors, including the Soviet Union and the role of Stalinism in the 'anti-bourgeois-democratic revolution'. When the delegates of the RCP attended the pre-Conference, they noted that out of the idea of the weakening of the USSR had come the slogan of 'unconditional defense of the Soviet Union', putting it in the first place before the 'defense of the European revolution against Stalinism'. The problem assumed real dimensions because each slogan implied a different position: to justify the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army (owing to the weakness of the Soviet Union) or to require the withdrawal from those territories.

Later, this debate led Jock Haston (leader of the RCP) to wonder about the class character of the USSR and to defend the concept of 'state capitalism' as a more

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



appropriate category for it. The ramifications of the debate on the nature of the Soviet State greatly exceeded the aims of this work, but it is important to mention them to give an account of the number that took the perspective of the RCP on the European issue. It was not limited to one or two points, but to rethinking all of the political program of the Fourth International. In response to the criticism that such questioning produced in the leadership of the SWP, Grant recalls the following:

Rather than correct their mistakes or reply politically to the criticisms of the British leadership, Cannon, Mandel, Frank, Pablo and the others resorted to organizational manoeuvres and intrigue in order to undermine the British section. First, the material of the British section was suppressed or distorted. Then the International leadership organized a secret faction inside the RCP around Healy in order to undermine and remove the leadership. These disastrous methods played a fatal role, which eventually undermined and destroyed the International movement. Obsessed with the attempt to undermine and destroy the Haston–Grant leadership at every opportunity, Cannon, Healy, Pablo, Frank and Mandel, played a wrecking role in relation to the British Trotskyist movement.<sup>28</sup>

### **Final Comments**

The only two powers that came out strengthened economic and politically were the US and the USSR. Their policy had the aim of perpetuation of the capitalist system in the area of American influence and the consolidation of the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Eastern Europe. The frustration of the revolutions in France and Italy, the main bastions of resistance, was directly related to these factors. Considering this we can say that what Ted Grant called ‘the bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution’ was witnessed, which had a double objective: on the one hand, elimination of any possibility of revolution in Europe; and, on the other hand, ensuring the domain and the ‘peaceful’ coexistence of the two powers that would dominate the world for the next 40 years.

Today we can understand the dynamics of the Fourth International’s debate as part of a rapidly changing and convulsed context in which there was an urgent need to define programmatic positions and political actions. The efforts for the reunification of the organization’s national sections, such as those of the French and the British, is an example of this. In the early 1940’s, each one of these sections was split over different issues (the discussion of entrism into the reformist parties, the nature of the Soviet Union, the necessity of building a Fourth International) and their reunification occurred without having settled these debates. Above that, the beginning of the war that cut off communication with each other and the Trotskyists’ repression (both by fascists and by Stalinists agents) worsened a situation that was already hard.

The debate over the national question in Europe was a break point for the young organization. The political crises of this period ended up with the losses of a great number of experienced militants (Marcel Hic, Abraham Leon, Pietro Tresso, just to name a few) and the quitting of many others (Felix Morrow, Jean Van Heijenoort,

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<sup>28</sup> Ted Grant, *History of British Trotskyism* (London: Wellred, 2002), p. 146.

Yvan Craipeau). The lack of a balanced discussion of the European processes and the dogmatic perspective on the theme of the revival of bourgeois democracy became an issue a few years later (the 1950s) when it was necessary to rebuild the organization in the face of the world's new political scenario.

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