

# FORUM

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**LENINIST AND SHACHTMAN  
POSITIONS ON IMPERIALIST WAR**

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## THE LENINIST AND SHACHTMAN POSITIONS ON IMPERIALIST WAR

The attempt here is to analyze Comrade Shachtman's position on war as expressed in "SOCIALIST POLICY AND THE WAR", parts I and II. In the first part of Shachtman's presentation he makes an interpretation of Lenin's position on the First World War; in the second he develops a position on World War III based on the differences between the two wars and contrasted with his view of Lenin's ideas. The conclusions drawn in part II flow naturally from the premises set up in Part I. In other words, within the logical system, if the first is correct, so is the second. Consequently, it is with the validity of the first section that we are mainly concerned here.

In part I Shachtman interprets Lenin's position in the following way: this war (WW I) was an imperialist war fought for the purpose of redividing colonies and spheres of influence; in no wise affected was the sovereignty of the major imperialists themselves. Therefore, Lenin could, and did, propose continuation of untrammelled class struggle in wartime, because if such struggle caused the military defeat of the government no reactionary consequences would result. In fact such a defeat would actually aid the proletariat by weakening the bourgeoisie. In World War III, Shachtman argues, the defeat of America will be the greater evil and will mean the defeat of the working class as well. This is because WW III will be fought for the conquest of the leading participants themselves as well as for their satellites and colonies. Shachtman contends this is especially true in the event of Russian victory. From this, in our view, the conclusion logically follows that we cannot aim for the workers' seizure of power during this war because such would risk an American defeat by Stalinism. This risk cannot be taken for the above reasons, hence we abandon the conceptual slogans of defeatism (intensification of class conflict to its fruition in direct struggle for power by the proletariat. We therefore and thereby give up, as well, during the war the struggle for socialism.

To this point there is little difference between Shachtman and Susan Green. However, Green introduces an additional determinant. She states that, while revolution in the warring countries was possible during the first WW, today this condition does not exist; rather, the proletariat, paralyzed by Stalinism, can no longer play an independent role. From this, Green says we must, while not giving up our ideas, etc., give critical support to and rely on American arms to save us and gain a breathing spell for the working class. She believes our policy should be to urge reforms which would strengthen the state in its war. On the other hand, though Shachtman has shown by a judicious distortion of Lenin (as we intend to prove) that the struggle for workers' power must be shelved for the duration because of the danger of defeat at the hands of the greater evil, Stalinism, he does not draw Green's conclusions. Instead, he says that we cannot support America because will wage an imperialist and reactionary war. Furthermore, its reactionary policies will endanger the nation and hence the working class. Instead, we must work to transform the character of the war from reactionary and imperialist to progressive and democratic. Since we can not do this by working toward a workers' state, we must do so by some other means. This is to be done by means of a labor party which perhaps not yet socialist, is of such a nature that it can come to power in the bourgeois state and change the nature of the war without civil war and the resultant risk of defeat by Stalinism.

It is needless to say that Shachtman's transitional program is a phantasy. It is however, the only kind of program that could possibly be put forth without coming out for support of the war, and is a program that enables him to remain, at least formally, in the anti-war camp.

Now let us go back to his original premises, his interpretation of Lenin. Yes, it is true that Lenin did say that the war was for colonies. However, the world war was not a limited war fought for limited objectives. It was a total war, a war in which each group of imperialists sought to smash the hegemony, the political and economic power, of the other. Lenin recognized this when he wrote:

"...The characteristic feature of imperialism is precisely that it strives to annex not only agricultural regions, but even highly industrialized regions (German appetite for Belgium, French appetite for Lorraine), because 1) the fact that the world is already divided up obliges those contemplating a new division to reach out for any kind of territory, and 2) because an essential feature of imperialism is the rivalry between a number of great powers in the striving for hegemony, i.e., for the conquest of territory, not such directly for themselves as to weaken the adversary and undermine his hegemony..."

The complete victory of one side over the other would certainly mean that the losers would lose a degree of national independence and would suffer national aggrandizement (e.g. the Versailles Treaty, the huge indemnities and reparations, dismemberment). All these things are a form of national oppression. If, at that time, the victors did not occupy the losers' countries, it was because they did not have to, they had gained economic supremacy as a result of their military operations which smashed the economic power of the losers, the stripping of their colonies being only a part. Lenin propounded his slogan "turn the imperialist war into civil war" for all countries because he saw in the wartime continuation of the struggle for socialism the only way of preventing the defeat and suffering of the proletariat would have to endure as a result of an imperialist-dictated peace.

"...the proletariat is opposed to defense of the fatherland in this imperialist war because of its predatory, slave-owning, reactionary character, because it is possible and necessary to oppose it (and to strive to convert it into a civil war for socialism)..." Also, "Progress, if we leave out the possibility of temporary steps backward, is possible only towards socialist society. Objectively, the imperialist bourgeois war...can...from the standpoint of the progressive class, be opposed only with a war against the bourgeoisie for power;..." And still more import: "We find the same error in Junius' arguments about which is better, victory or defeat? His conclusion is that both are equally bad...This is the point of view not of the revolutionary proletariat, but of the pacifist petty bourgeois. If we speak about the 'revolutionary intervention' of the proletariat...then we must raise the question from another point of view namely: 1) is 'revolutionary intervention' possible without the risk of defeat? 2) Is it possible to scourge the bourgeoisie and the government of one's own country without taking that risk? 3) Have we not always asserted, and does not the historical experience of reactionary wars prove, that defeats help the cause of the revolutionary class?" (from Lenin's Coll. Works, Vol. XIX)

He posed the "civil war" slogan, which was merely/<sup>re</sup> asserting in a different way, under changed conditions, the basic principles of Marxism, principles that the social-chauvinists had abandoned when the war began. Lenin pointed out the fact that social revolution is impossible without the government being in a state of crisis and that such a condition can be brought about by military defeats; Lenin also justified the fact that the struggle for socialism in wartime incurs the risk of defeat by the enemy, not, as Shachtman claims, because such defeat would

either aid or at least not harm the proletariat, but because revolution is possible in all warring countries. The present excerpts from a polemic by Lenin against the German Social-chauvinist, Kolb, to support this.

Kolb attacked Lenin thus: "The consequence (of the tactics of Liebknecht's followers), writes Kolb, 'would be that the internal struggle within the German nation would reach boiling point and this would weaken its military and political power!.. to the advantage and victory of the imperialism of the Triple Entente". Lenin's reply: "Internal struggle which has reached the boiling point' is civil war. Kolb is right when he says that the tactics of the left lead to this; he is right when he says that they mean the 'military weakening' of Germany, i.e., desiring and aiding its defeat, defeatism. Kolb is wrong - only! - in that he refuses to see the international character of these tactics of the Left. For 'the internal struggle to reach boiling point', the 'weakening of the military power' of the imperialist bourgeoisie and 'by virtue of this, in connection with it, by mean of it) the transformation of the imperialist war into civil war are possible in all belligerent countries..."

Shachtman in his article interprets Lenin as follows: "the proletarian classes could follow a policy of intensified class struggle against their own governments as the main enemy - a struggle that would be facilitated by military defeat and would at the same time contribute to the military defeat of their own country - because even if such a defeat were to occur the country would not run the risk of being subjugated by the enemy." Here is Shachtman's distortion of Lenin. He portrays Lenin as basing his policy on the fact that the objective results of the victory of the other side would aid the proletariat because the war was being fought for strictly colonial aims. Shachtman inadvertently contradicts himself by interpreting Lenin in an entirely opposite light on the same page of his own article! "...THE VERY CONCEPTION OF VICTORY (OR DEFEAT) by one imperialist bloc being a lesser evil excluded, IN PRACTICE, the conception of the revolutionary intervention by the European proletariat to put an end to the imperialist war..." (Our emphasis). Yes, Shachtman, in his conception of World War III in which he thinks in terms of victory or defeat and of lesser evils, etc., does, in fact, exclude the possibility of socialist revolution in wartime. Instead, he creates a fanciful labor party which does the things a workers' state alone can do without the need of a workers' struggle culminating in a dual power development.

Does this mean, then, that there are no differences between World War I and World War III? Not at all. Despite the fact that there are important differences, they are not those qualitative differences which would warrant the abandonment of the struggle for socialism in the course of the coming war. That is the basic reason why we continue to defend the Leninist conception of the struggle for workers power in wartime, for to do otherwise is to effectively abandon that struggle. Shachtman surrenders this concept because the victory of Stalinism, a non-capitalist social force, will result in the victory of a reaction far more extensive and complete than the victory of any capitalist power could be. We say, however, that such a victory of Stalinism, if that is what is to occur, will be the terrible price the proletariat will have to pay for its failure to overthrow capitalism in the course of this war and of the two preceding ones. This war must be viewed as an outgrowth of the previous imperialist wars. The differences between the three wars (in the objective results of the victory or defeat for one side or another) are one of intensity of reaction brought about by the steady worsening of conditions. In the same broad sense, Stalinism itself is a reaction brought on by the continued failure of the working class to put

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an end to capitalism!

Hence these differences are merely additional reasons why the struggle for socialism can not be postponed or abandoned, but must be intensified. Shachtman is right when he says the nation is in danger in this war. But only the working class power during the war can save the nation. That and nothing short of that.

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Berkeley,  
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(Please note: The above was written some months ago and has been discussed in the San Francisco and Los Angeles Branches. Consequently, with the passing of time and in the light of discussion, a number of reformulations and extensions of the ideas expressed above have come to mind. However, the article is being presented as originally written (with the exception of the mandatory substitution of a few phrases) since it has already been circulated and discussed in its present form.

WS & JT

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