

CONTRIBUTIONS
TO THE STUDY OF
THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL STRUGGLES
OF THE TROTSKYISTS
DURING WORLD WAR TWO

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

(Translator's note: This is the introductory note, for which the Institut Leon Trotsky accepts responsibility, to issue No. 23, in September 1985, of the "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", from which the two succeeding articles have been taken in translation.)

DID THE WAR "OPEN OUR EYES"?

The present issue, No. 23, of "Cahiers Leon Trotsky" is a direct result of the work on Volumes 16 to 24 of the "Oeuvres", the French edition of the writings of Leon Trotsky, apart from the easily-available books, between 1933 and 1940. However, No. 23 of the "Cahiers" has subsequently developed almost independently of even our original intentions to prepare issues covering the years 1938 - 1940.

The approach and the declaration of World War II raised before our eyes all the problems of principle and of tactics in the attitude of revolutionaries to the war. Of course, this attitude includes a re-affirmation of the attitude which Lenin formulated in World War I. But it also included the problem of the "defence of the USSR, which came inevitably during the war to influence the line, from the moment when the USSR was linked to one bloc of capitalist powers against another. We discovered, from the letters at least as much from the documents intended for publication, in Trotsky's archives, that nothing was simple, even for him and - to put it another way, that we were dealing with questions simpler than they were then believed to be.

As we went along, we accumulated statements and became aware of contradictions and clues. In brief, we reaped a harvest which really did not properly belong either in the introductions or in the notes to the volumes of the "Oeuvres". Yet it was important to collect, to present systematically, to compare and to discuss these materials. This became clear to us, and we decided to prepare an issue of the "Cahiers" on the war. This we started in May 1984.

"Revolutionary Defeatism" was one of the principal questions which these documents presented. To speak frankly, it seemed to us that Trotsky's defence of revolutionary defeatism in the 1930's rested on a formulation which the Trotskyist militants and organisations of the period did not all interpret in the same way. Moreover, his formulation seemed to us to be slightly different from those which Lenin had been able to provide while he was alive, or the Communist International after his death. Furthermore, it seemed to us that the sustained attention which was devoted in 1939 - 40 to the discussion with those who were for "defeatism in the USSR, at the time of the crisis in the SWP, had concealed to some extent other unquestionably real differences, such as those among the partisans of the "defence of the USSR" themselves. How could one defend the USSR, without becoming to the same extent a "defencist" in one's own country?