

Toward Freedom

Some Thoughts on Civil War Reconstruction and Crimea

by Doxey A. Wilkerson

THE correctness of the Crimea decisions to "extirpate" fascism is attested by the history of post-Civil War America. The fatal weaknesses of our otherwise progressive policy for the reconstruction of the slave-owning South throws considerable light on the current question of "What to do with Nazi Germany?"

Lincoln's reactionary successor, President Johnson, gave the "Burt" Wheeler-Norman Thomas answer to the crucial question of what to do with the defeated rebel states of the Confederacy. His program was that of a "soft peace"—to grant general political amnesty to Confederate leaders, to restore the slave-owners to their former economic and political control over the southern white and Negro masses, and even to admit obvious traitors to the Congress of the United States.

The military victory was to be cancelled out by a policy which annulled all that for which the people had fought. Johnson's program during 1865-66 was comparable to what Hitler's most conscious helpers in our country now propose for a defeated Germany.

But between 1866-76, fortunately, the so-called "radicals" in Congress stepped in to reverse the reactionary Johnsonian trend. They enacted truly revolutionary measures which turned right-side up (not upside down!) the whole political structure of the South.



The former Confederacy was divided into five military districts and subjected to martial law. The Confederate leaders were disfranchised and barred from holding office. The masses of poor whites and recently emancipated slaves were enfranchised. The oligarchic state governments were abolished and reconstructed along democratic lines, on the basis of universal manhood suffrage.

Here was something more akin to today's Crimean program for the reconstruction of Nazi Germany. Under the aegis of an enlightened military dictatorship, democracy was born for the first time in the South, and its early growth was protected by force.

BUT there were at least two fatal limitations to this program. First, the economic base of the slave power was allowed to stand intact, thus paving the way for its later resurgence to dominance. Perhaps, it was too much to expect the bourgeois democratic federal government of that period to extend its policies to the logical and necessary program of confiscating the great plantations of the Confederacy and reapportioning them among the masses of the people. To do so, however, would have provided firm economic roots for southern democracy struggling to emerge.

Second, the broad inter-class coalition which provided the political foundations for the

progressive policies of the Civil War and Reconstruction was broken, with the result that a "Dewey" (then known as Rutherford B. Hayes) was elected President in 1876. He withdrew the federal troops from the South, and gave the still struggling forces of Bourbon reaction the green light to move ahead with their program of violence and terrorization to destroy the young democracies which were building a new and freer life for the white and Negro masses of the southern states and which had had too short a period of development to defend themselves from the vicious onslaught of its powerful enemies.

IF WE had had an American "Crimea" in the 1860's, we would have set about thoroughly to "extirpate" the rotten economic, political and ideological foundations of slavocracy, and we would have maintained military controls until the job was finished. Then our nation would have been spared the ensuing decades of southern reaction which still continues to oppress the white and Negro masses of the South and to weaken the security and freedom of all Americans.

We have a Crimean program today—for the reconstruction of Nazi Germany. As President Roosevelt told Congress Thursday, it "means the end of Nazism and of the Nazi party—and all of its barbaric laws and institutions." It calls for the use of democratic force, over an extended period of time, until a new and stronger and freer Germany can emerge from the ashes of fascism.