

Response to John Molyneux

Donny Gluckstein

John Molyneux's generous review of *A People's History of the Second World War* in *Irish Marxist Review* 4 raises an important question which goes beyond the remit of the book: 'what was (and is) the correct political line for socialists to take in relation to the war?'. I agree with his conclusion on this, but in reaching it he rejects the notion of two wars - an inter-imperialist war from above, and a people's war (fought by resistance movements, etc.) from below. John prefers the idea of a single war.

It is true that, as John writes, 'the Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin governments and the ruling classes they represented ... fought the war for their own imperialist interests and not for democracy or anti-fascist principle,' and 'it was nevertheless in the interests of the working class internationally that Nazi Germany and its fascist allies were militarily defeated... that revolutionary socialists should not have been neutral on D-Day or at Stalingrad.'

However, there are two problems with setting this formulation in a one-war framework. Writing of Churchill and co. that 'objectively, whatever their motives, they were fighting fascist regimes' and thus furthering 'the interests of the working class internationally' risks downplaying the imperialist nature of the Allies' defence of their empires. The defeat of fascism as a system (as opposed to warding off the threats to empire of rival states), was patently not their aim. Churchill, for example, gave fascism enthusiastic support before and after the war. The record of Roosevelt and Stalin was little better. It is surely wrong to privilege the 350m Europeans conquered by Hitler over the 450m under the British heel.

A better way to encompass all the facts is to see D-Day or Stalingrad as a clash of imperialist blocs whose **unintended side effect** assisted the working class. In the same way that the ruling class uses divisions amongst the masses (racism, sexism, nationalism etc.), our class can benefit from splits among the ruling class. From this perspective we can celebrate the victory at Stalingrad without underplaying the imperialist nature of the Allied governments' war effort, or ignoring their actions before and after 1939-45.

What of the resistance movements? They shared the same enemy as Allied governments, but if so, were they 'objectively' furthering the interests of that capitalist bloc? If there was only one war, that is the ineluctable conclusion. Again this approach does not fit the evidence. Apart from ending Axis rule, resistance movements had entirely different political, social and economic aims to both the Axis and Allies, and threatened both. That is why Allied governments used them for military advantage, but moved to crush or sideline them as soon as they had served their purpose.

Though this is expressly not his aim, John's one-war position inadvertently concedes too much to the Allied governments and downplays the radical content of resistance. If my book has any merit at all it probably lies in its simultaneous appreciation of the unashamedly imperialist nature of the Allied governments, and the radical character of the movement from below (which hitherto tended to be seen as merely a military adjunct to the Allies). So 99.9% overall agreement, John, but I still think that the two wars formulation fits the facts better.