Chapter 7 - The struggle against Fascism

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Fascism has spattered the blood of millions across the pages of twentieth century history. In Germany, between 1933 and 1945, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party set up the most savage and murderous dictatorship ever known.

All opposition was prohibited. Spies and informers in every workplace and in every area reported the faintest whiff of discontent to the Gestapo secret police.

A message of foul and fanatical racism issued from official radio broadcasts, from the newspapers, cinemas, school rooms and churches.

Any books, films, plays, art or music that tried to be original or to raise new questions about human life and culture were banned; so-called ?degenerate art? was piled high into bonfires and set ablaze.

As the great poet Heinrich Heine once warned, where books are burned, soon human flesh will burn. Hundreds of thousands of gypsies, homosexuals, foreigners and disabled people were rounded up by the Nazis into concentration camps and executed.

Special cruelty was shown to the Jews. Mixed marriages were banned and broken up. Jews were driven from their jobs in public life, beaten and abused in the streets, their shops, homes and synagogues stoned and burned.

Denounced as ?sub-humans?, Jews were forced to wear a yellow star at all times and were driven into ghettos and prison camps.

Eventually, as German fascism entered its last, most frenzied stage, an attempt was made to carry out a ?Final Solution to the Jewish problem? that was unparalleled in its barbarity.

At first, hundreds of thousands were marched into lines before mass graves and killed by firing squad. Countless others were worked to death on slave labour projects or left to die through starvation and disease.

But such was the scale of the slaughter that the fascists began to worry about the time and money they were spending on mass murder. They came up with a sick alternative, faster and cheaper.

In purpose-built extermination camps, Jewish men, women and children were herded into showers and gassed with the deadly poison Zyklon B.

Overall six million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis.

Intoxicated with their own rhetoric about the ?racial superiority? of the German people, the Nazis waged a relentless all-out war for ?lebensraum? (living space) against neighbouring European states.
For the second time this century, the whole of Europe was reduced to a killing field.

The Soviet Union bore the brunt of Nazism’s fury. As Adolf Hitler’s armies surged east, the Nazis shot every Communist party member, every commissar, every Soviet official that they could lay their hands on.

By 1945, over 20 million Russians had perished in World War Two.

There is one other fact about the Nazis that we must never forget. They could have been stopped.

At the time Hitler took power, the German working class was organised in a bigger, more powerful and more disciplined movement than the workers of any other country bar Russia.

Two parties – the reformist Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD) – each had millions of members and active supporters.

In the last elections before Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, the combined vote for these workers’ parties was around 14 million – more than the Nazis could muster.

Each party had tens of thousands of men under arms.

Between Hitler and the reins of power stood a mighty force, lacking neither for numbers nor for heroism on the part of the rank and file.

If the leaders of the German workers had been courageous and clear-sighted enough, they could have smashed the fascists completely. Yet the battle with the fascists in Germany was lost with hardly a shot being fired.

**Hitler and the Nazis**

Hitler was a sworn enemy of the working class movement. From a lower middle class background, as a young man he failed to get a place at art college, and found himself forced out onto the fringes of society.

Though he tried his hand working on a building site, he could not get on with his fellow workers. In particular, they hated him because he refused to join their trade union. Isolated and pretentious, he both hated and was deeply fearful of the working class.

Hitler concluded that it would never be enough just to use the law and the police to defeat a movement as powerful as that of the German workers. A failed military coup in 1920 convinced him that even the army could not be relied upon to take action against the people.

He realised he needed to build a political movement that could draw on mass support right across Germany. Italy provided him with a model.

The refusal of the Italian Socialist Party to take power during the revolutionary years of 1919-1921 had allowed the Fascist Party of Benito Mussolini to win mass support, principally among the middle classes.

He took power with the support of the capitalists, and proceeded to destroy all the organisations of the working class and all democratic freedoms.

Hitler joined a small right-wing group, the German Workers’ Party, and soon became its leading figure, changing its name to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party – Nazis for short. By 1923 his movement had grown in strength as an extreme answer to the threat of communism, and was able to hold rallies of up to 50,000.
Hitler realised that the strength of Marxism and the Social Democracy was that it relied on the masses of working class people who were forced by their conditions of life to struggle against the system.

The experiences of his youth in Austria, in particular the size, discipline, militancy and political education of the Austrian Social Democrats, impressed upon him the need for a mass counter-revolutionary party that could oppose the mass party of workers' revolution.

After watching from the sidelines in horror as an enormous Social Democratic march went by, Hitler decided:

"The masses love a commander more than a petitioner and feel inwardly more satisfied by a doctrine tolerating no other besides itself. . . . If Social Democracy is opposed by a doctrine of greater truth, but equal brutality of methods, the latter will conquer, though this may require the bitterest struggle."

This led Hitler to conclusions very different from those of most right-wing politicians. Instead of trying to keep the population passive and uninvolved in politics, he aimed to stir up whole sections of the people to struggle . . . against the working class movement.

And he knew exactly where such a force could be found: among the vast numbers of middle class people, the petit-bourgeoisie.

The shopkeepers, professionals, lawyers, doctors, small businessmen and traders felt their position becoming ever less secure as German capitalism went into crisis in the inter-war years.

Hitler and the Nazis began to organise these people, together with hundreds of thousands of unemployed and desperate workers who had become separated from the rest of their class.

The Nazis directed the anger of this mass movement away from big business and towards the working class and the Jews.

To win a mass following, Hitler had to present his ideas as if they were radical, sometimes even as if they were anti-capitalist. But Nazi "socialism" was a cynical trick. In 1926 the Nazis committed themselves to complete support for the right of the rich to keep their private property. And once they got into power, the Nazis smashed the unions and boosted the profits of the rich by nearly 10% in just 5 years, freezing workers' wages at the same time.

Throughout the 1920s, as the Nazis drummed up ever more support, Hitler and his lieutenants held regular meetings with the rich and powerful, especially the owners of the heavy industries like iron, steel and mining. These bosses poured funds into the Nazi coffers.

An economic slump engulfed the capitalist world in 1929. The middle classes grew ever more desperate as small businesses collapsed. By 1932 there were 5 million workers on the dole in Germany. Society became deeply divided as people looked for extreme answers to an extreme situation.

As Germany slid ever closer to a revolutionary crisis, support for the Communists grew massively. But so did support for the Nazis.

The stage was being set for a final confrontation. Everything depended on whether the working class parties would find the path to revolution, crush the Nazis and establish a socialist republic in Germany, or whether the Nazis would first seize power, abolish the democratic republic and drown the workers' movement in blood.
The cowardice of German Social Democracy

By the late 1920s the SPD was far from being the revolutionary party that Marx and Engels had worked so hard to shape and direct.

In 1914, as we have seen, it broke with internationalism and backed the slaughter of the First World War. The years after Germany’s defeat in the war were marked by sharp upheavals and revolutionary struggles.

The monarchy of Kaiser Wilhelm was overthrown? millions of workers now looked to the Social Democrats to transform Germany into a socialist republic.

But the SPD leaders had long since made their peace with capitalism. They established a coalition government with bourgeois parties, and worked all out to stop power being seized by workers? and soldiers? councils, as had happened in Russia.

Those socialists who remained true to Marxism had formed a revolutionary and internationalist movement, the Spartakists. In 1919 the SPD leaders set up a right-wing militia called the Freikorps, made up of former soldiers and officers.

They set about smashing the revolutionary workers with the utmost violence. With the full knowledge and approval of the SPD leaders, the Freikorps arrested the Spartakist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and murdered them in cold blood.

Yet the history of the working class movement shows that the broad mass of workers will only slowly abandon the organisations and parties that first awaken them to political life.

Despite its crimes against socialism, the SPD retained the loyalty and support of millions of German workers, especially in the most important factories and heavy industries.

The growth of the Nazis in the late 1920s was mainly the responsibility of the SPD leaders.

In May 1928, riding on a wave of working class militancy, the SPD won a huge victory in the elections. The Nazis polled a mere 2.6% of the vote.

But the SPD formed a government jointly with the capitalist Peoples? Party and proceeded to abandon every one of its promises to the voters.

This cowardice repelled the middle classes, who lost faith in the prospect of the mass working class party ever achieving anything. The far right prospered on this disillusion.

By September 1930 unemployment had risen to over 3 million. The SPD was deeply discredited. In the elections it lost ground across the board. The Communist Party? s share of the vote rose from 10% to over 13% of the vote.

But this was dwarfed by the rise in support for the Nazis. They rocketed from just 800,000 votes in 1928 to over 6 million in 1930. They were now the second biggest party in Germany after the SPD.

The opportunism and compromising policies of the SPD were confusing the workers and pushing the middle classes and the unemployed into the hands of the fascists.

The key to the situation was whether the Communist KPD could win the confidence of the SPD? s working class followers, unite with them in action to smash the Nazi gangs, win them over in their millions and
come to the head of the working class movement in a struggle for socialist revolution.

**Stalin Disarms the Communists**

If it could only adopt a correct policy, the KPD had every chance of success. But this crucial condition was missing. Under the leadership of Thälmann, Neumann and Remelle, loyal servants of Stalin, the KPD misunderstood every aspect of the Nazi threat.

They failed to understand the nature of fascism itself. Instead of stressing what was distinct about fascism, how, unlike other right-wing parties, it organised mass fighting contingents to smash the working class movement on the streets, the Stalinist leaders of the KPD tried to suggest that fascism was the same as all other forms of capitalist reaction.

Incredibly, they declared that the Nazis were not the immediate enemy! This role was taken by the SPD which, according to Stalin, was simply "the moderate wing of fascism". The Nazis and the Social Democrats were, in Stalin's phrase, "not antipodes, but twins".

After the opportunist phase of 1924 to 1928, in which Stalin had led the Communist International into disastrous policies in Britain and China, the bureaucrats in the Kremlin now swung wildly to the ultra left. Stalin proclaimed a "Third Period", in which the final battle against capitalism would be fought.

The Social Democrats were declared the greatest enemies of the working class, "social fascists" and more dangerous than Hitler and the real fascists. The main task was to defeat the social fascists.

If Hitler took power, according to the Stalinists, he would not survive for long. After Hitler dealt with the SPD, claimed the KPD, it would be "our turn next".

Stalin's main conclusion could not have been more damaging for the working class: the KPD was to refuse to campaign for a united fight with the SPD and its millions of working class supporters against the Nazis.

**Trotsky sounds the alarm**

Leon Trotsky was the only leading figure in the international communist movement who understood the true nature of the fascist threat and who advanced a plan of action that could have defeated Hitler.

For three years, in a series of brilliant articles and pamphlets written from the isolated Turkish island of Prinkipo where he had been exiled, he strained every nerve to alert the KPD to the mortal danger it faced, and to the terrible consequences that Stalin's policy would have for the German workers and the entire world.

Trotsky explained the origins of fascism in the decline of capitalist society and its specific function for the bourgeoisie:

"The bourgeoisie is leading its society to complete bankruptcy. It is capable of assuring the people neither bread nor peace. This is precisely why it cannot any longer tolerate the democratic order."

"It is forced to smash the workers by the use of physical violence. The discontent of the workers and peasants, however, cannot be brought to an end by the police alone. Moreover, it is often impossible to make the army march against the people."

"It begins by disintegrating and ends with the passage of a large section of the soldiers over to the
people’s side. That is why finance capital is obliged to create special armed bands, trained to fight the workers just as certain breeds of dog are trained to hunt game.

?The historic function of Fascism is to smash the working class, destroy its organisations and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery.

?The Fascists find their human material mainly in the petty bourgeoisie . . . its dissatisfaction, indignation and despair are diverted by the fascists away from big capital and against the workers.?

For Trotsky, it was a criminal absurdity to define the Social Democracy as a variety of fascism. The SPD certainly served the capitalists in office ? but only by retaining the support of the workers through democratic elections.

The fascists would serve the capitalists by abolishing democratic rights and eliminating every independent workers? organisation altogether . . . including the SPD.

Millions of social democratic workers were well aware of the deadly threat of fascism and were ready to act against it. The SPD leaders ? ever loyal to peaceful, legal methods ? were trying to stop this giving rise to a militant fight against the Nazis that might end in civil war or revolution.

The job of the communists was to find ways of turning the SPD?s members against their leaders and towards a common fight against the Nazis. Denouncing the SPD as ?social-fascists? could only achieve the opposite.

Trotsky argued that the KPD should issue a simple appeal to the social democracy: for a workers? united front against fascism.

This meant that the Communists should offer agreements with the SPD at every level to organise practical defence of the working class against the terror of the Nazi gangs.

The KPD should declare that it would defend the SPD?s offices, meetings and printing press if the Nazis attacked it, and should call on the SPD to give a similar guarantee to the Communists.

In every factory, village, town, city and region, this would have meant the two parties meeting together ? members and leaders ? to work out how to take on and destroy the Nazis in battle.

This simple proposal would have been immediately understood by millions of social democratic workers ? the KPD would have won their lasting respect as a result.

If the SPD leaders refused to build such a united front then their followers would be able to see that it was the social democrats, not the Communists, who were failing to fight the fascists. The Communists could only gain as a result. As Trotsky explained:

?The programme of action must be strictly practical, strictly objective, without any of those artificial ?claims?, without any reservations so that the social democratic worker can say to himself: what the communists propose is completely indispensable for the struggle against fascism.?

The Stalinists denounced Trotsky?s proposal. They accused him of wanting to support the SPD, of sacrificing the independence of the Communist Party, of being a reformist, of being a ?social-fascist? himself. In doing so they showed their complete ignorance of the history and principles of Marxism.
The united front was a tactic, similar to the tactic used by the Bolsheviks when they fought with Kerensky’s supporters in 1917 to defeat the threat of a coup from General Kornilov.

The effect then had been not only to beat the coup, but to strengthen the Bolsheviks against Kerensky, whose struggle against Kornilov had been weak and half-hearted (see chapter 2).

In a similar way, the united front against fascism was designed not just to crush the Nazis but at the same time to help the communists to grow at the expense of the SPD.

That is why Trotsky insisted that the KPD should keep its independence, and should at no time blur the distinction between the reformist programme of the SPD and the revolutionary aims of the communists:

?. . . parliamentary compromises concluded between the revolutionary party and the Social Democracy serve, as a rule, to the advantage of the Social Democracy. Practical agreements for mass action, for purposes of struggle, are always useful to the revolutionary party . . . No common platform with the Social Democracy, or with the leaders of the trade unions, no common publications, banners, placards! March separately, but strike together! Agree only how to strike, whom to strike, and when to strike! Such an agreement can be concluded even with the devil himself, with his grandmother, and even with [SPD leaders] Noske and Grezesinsky. On one condition: not to bind one’s hands.?

Time and again, Trotsky appealed to the millions of KPD supporters, trying to show how behind the Stalinists? opposition to the united front lay a complete lack of faith in the ability of the working class to beat the Nazis at all, an excuse not to fight.

Trotsky addressed the KPD?s loyal members with the most passionate and urgent of appeals:

?. . . there are among the Communist officials not a few cowardly careerists and fakers whose little posts, whose incomes, and more than that, whose hides, are dear to them. These creatures are very much inclined to spout ultra radical phrases beneath which is concealed a wretched and contemptible fatalism. ?Without a victory over the Social Democracy, we cannot battle against fascism!? say such terrible revolutionists, and for this reason . . . they get their passports ready.

Worker-Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for any place; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste, worker-Communists, you have very little time left!?

The call fell on deaf ears.

. . . and they refused to close ranks

The stormtroopers of Hitler?s SA beat up and intimidated socialists, union activists and Jews, staging their own uniformed parades in the streets of towns and cities across Germany.

SPD members could not fail to see the need to defend themselves. By the end of 1931 the pressure from the party?s rank and file was so great that the leaders had to be seen to be doing something.

They set up a campaign called the Iron Front. The aim was to give the appearance of action, while keeping all activity peaceful and legal.

The Reichsbanner militia was brought into an alliance with all manner of respectable public figures who were prepared to speak out against the Nazis, on one condition: that no militant action was undertaken.
Trotsky could see exactly what the Iron Front was all about:

?The ?Iron Front? is essentially a bloc of numerically powerful social democratic trade unions with impotent groups of bourgeois ?republicans? . . . when it comes to fighting, corpses are useless, but they come in handy to keep the living from fighting.

Their bourgeois allies serve the social democratic leaders as a bridle around the necks of the workers? organisations.?

Yet at the same time, many SPD activists in the Iron Front fought the Nazis and started stockpiling arms. One Reichsbanner commander declared that among the masses there was a real mood for a united front, and that if necessary he would establish it ?over the heads of the leaders?.

But the KPD?s ultra-left tactics played into the hands of the SPD leaders, giving them every excuse to avoid a united front. When one SPD leader, Breitscheid, issued an appeal for a united front, the KPD rejected it out of hand.

This allowed the SPD tops to claim that the communists were not serious about fighting the fascists, and were really only interested in smashing the SPD.

They were helped in this by the communists? ?theory? of Social Fascism. One KPD leader, in Chemnitz, even went so far as to state that ?Bolshevism and fascism share a common goal; the destruction of capitalism and of the Social Democratic Party.? 

Instead of a real fight for the united front, the KPD set up its own front organisation, the Antifa (which stood for ?Anti Fascist Action?). It engaged in brave confrontations with the Nazis.

But KPD leader Ernst Thälmann still declared that any SPD members who wanted unity should simply join the Antifa as individuals. He explained this as being a united front only from below, without making any appeal to the SPD leaders.

Trotsky ridiculed this, pointing out that the SPD members wanted a real united front between the two parties, not just an appeal to join the KPD?s ?ready-made? front body.

At the same time the KPD adopted disgraceful tactics that repelled the SPD membership. In 1931 the Nazis began a campaign to overthrow the SPD government in the state of Prussia. They gathered enough support to force a referendum to be held on the issue.

The KPD at first correctly opposed the Nazi referendum. Then they committed a criminal error. They wrote to the SPD leadership and demanded that they make a united front. But the letter carried a threat. If the SPD did not agree, then the KPD would vote with the Nazis!

This sudden, and contradictory, switch from opposing the united front to demanding it with menaces gave the SPD leaders the pretext they needed to avoid a united front with the communists. They could show to their members that the KPD was not to be trusted, that it would as easily unite with the Nazis as with them.

The SPD leaders refused Thälmann?s offer and the workers were treated to the demoralising and stomach turning spectacle of the KPD campaigning jointly with the Nazis to unseat an SPD government.

Throughout 1932 the SPD and KPD leaders? policy did its work. Every opportunity to smash the Nazis was allowed to slip by. Even as late as November 1932 the combined vote for the two workers? parties exceeded that polled by the Nazis.
But when President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, the Nazis had taken office with scarcely a shot having been fired against them.

Loyal to capitalist democracy to the end, the SPD declared that Hitler’s appointment was technically legal. They opposed taking any action. They got the leaders of their union federation to write begging letters to the Nazis, promising not to destabilise Hitler’s government so long as they were allowed to remain legal.

They got their reward for this cowardice: Hitler banned the unions and the SPD within a matter of months.

The KPD went through a period of wild swings in policy. They insisted, even with the Nazis in power, that the SPD remained the main threat. Then, at last, as the KPD leaders began to be rounded up, Stalin suddenly did a policy U-turn.

Through the Communist International he changed the KPD’s line from above, addressing an appeal for a united front to the leaders of the SPD.

He went further, even getting the KPD to abandon all political criticism of the SPD. Lenin and Trotsky’s idea of marching separately and striking together was still a closed book to Stalin.

Then came the bombshell. On 7 April the Communist International announced that the political line of the KPD was completely correct up to and during Hitler’s coup! No lessons were to be learnt from the miserable collapse of the strongest workers’ movement in the world.

Despite the zig-zags of policy, the incoherent and counter-productive tactics, despite the failure to stop Hitler, Nazism’s total victory, the banning of the KPD itself and the imprisonment of Ernst Thälmann, Stalin was claiming that the KPD had been correct all along.

Even more worrying for genuine communists was the fact that not a single section of the Communist International voted against this line or dared to criticise it. The death knell of the Communist International was sounded.

If . . . If Trotsky’s policy had been adopted by the German Communists, the outcome would have been different. The SPD leaders would have been powerless to prevent the united front with the KPD indefinitely.

Together, the Reichsbanner and the Red Front Fighters, backed up by the immense power of the trade unions and the 14 million workers who voted for their parties at the polls, could have scattered the Nazi gangs.

The middle classes would have gradually lost faith in the Nazis. This time, they would have thought, as the SA was smashed by direct military and mass confrontation, the working class parties seem to have gone beyond words to action. Perhaps they are the ones who will bring order and peace to Germany.

The SPD’s membership would have been filled with a new respect and comradeship towards their co-fighters in the KPD. Joint anti-fascist committees in the towns and factories could have gone forward to coordinate the affairs of the workers’ movement, drawing in delegates and taking shape as German Soviets.

As the economic and political instability of Germany continued, with the Nazis reduced to atoms, the need for a workers’ republic would have been recognised by a growing number of social democratic workers.

The cowardice of the SPD would have been increasingly recognised by its supporters. Just as the Bolsheviks supplanted the hold of the Mensheviks between February and October 1917, so the KPD could
have steadily won a majority of the German working class. Revolution would have been the result, this time not in a backward semi-feudal empire like Russia, but in the most advanced industrial powerhouse of Europe.

A workers' Germany could have come directly to the aid of the USSR, breaking its isolation and fatally undermining the whole social basis for Stalin's conservative caste. Over the bones of the fascists, the world revolution would have received a mighty impulse.

But it was not to be. Instead of a fortress of socialism, Social Democracy and Stalinism had prepared a different fate for Europe: fascist barbarism, genocide of whole peoples, starvation and war.

**France 1934 ? Unity at Last?**

The victory of Nazism in Germany had a profound affect on the working class movements of other European countries. In Austria the Schutzbund, a militia set up by the mass Social Democratic Party, fought bravely but unsuccessfully against a coup by the fascist Dollfuss.

And in France, events unfolded which were to push the Socialist and Communist Parties into a united front against fascism, against the will of their leaders. On 6 February a large fascist demonstration against corruption descended on the French parliament building and smashed its way into the assembly. The parliamentary deputies fled and the prime minister, Daladier of the bourgeois Radical Party, resigned.

Fascism was on the march and this sent an electric shock through the French workers' movement.

The Communist Party had loyally followed Stalin's sectarian ?social fascism? policy. On 6 February they had also demonstrated outside parliament, many of their 30,000 members mingling in with the fascists! Then, still refusing to form a united front with the Socialists, they held an anti-fascist demonstration of their own on 9 February. Isolated, they found themselves faced with a vicious police attack leaving six worker-Communists dead.

Rank and file Communists began to learn the lessons. On 12 February two columns of workers ? one Communist, one Socialist ? marched into the centre of Paris. Communist party stewards tried in vain to keep the workers apart. One observer, Daniel Guerin, described what happened next:

?The communist column turned around the central island in one direction, the socialist column in the opposite direction. Then when they met, their waves joined, melted into one another, to the cry ?Unity! Unity!?.

Their mass now advanced, in serried ranks across the whole of the Cours de Vincennes, singing the Internationale.?

The workers had formed the united front themselves. Spontaneously mingling together, they showed France and the world that they would fight together against fascism. In doing so they made a mockery of the Stalin line.

Across France, without waiting for the leadership?s say-so, Communist Party members set up joint committees with the Socialists to fight the menace of fascism.

For weeks the French Communist leaders tried to hold to the line of ?social fascism?. Then suddenly in May a complete change was announced. . . from Moscow of course. The French Communists were to form
The reason for this had little to do with the need to defend the working class organisations? after all Stalin had remained unmoved as the German communists had been crushed. The key to the change lay elsewhere, in the foreign policy of the Kremlin bureaucracy.

The Theory of Socialism in One Country? meant that the main task of Communist parties around the world was not to make the revolution in their own countries, but to defend the Soviet bureaucracy. Until the spring of 1934 Stalin had been seeking an alliance with Germany. Incredibly, he had not at first believed that Hitler?s rise to power would be an obstacle to this:

?Of course we are far from being enthusiastic about the fascist regime in Germany. But it is not a question of fascism here, if only for the reason that fascism in Italy, for example, has not prevented the USSR from establishing the best relations with that country. But it?s a different matter if Hitler took a ?new? policy, which in the main recalls the policy of the former German Kaisers, who at one time occupied the Ukraine and marched against Leningrad . . .?

This ?new? policy quickly revealed itself, shattering Stalin?s hopes for ?the best relations? with the Nazi killers. Despite Stalin?s officials wining and dining with Nazi diplomats, on April 14 1924 the Germans refused to sign a joint treaty with the USSR.

Stalin now had to look for new imperialist allies to ?defend? the Soviet Union. He turned to France. And suddenly, as the USSR began negotiations with French imperialism, the joint struggle to defend bourgeois democracy against French fascism took on a new importance for the Stalinists.

Was the united front to be a means of helping the Communists to win over the masses of workers who looked to the reformist Socialist Party, to take forward the fight for revolution?

Was this a return to Lenin?s policy of the united front, which had persuaded millions who had once supported the Mensheviks to follow the Bolsheviks?

No. The Communist leader, Thorez, who had previously called for a ?pitiless? campaign against the ?social fascists?, now declared that in speeches, newspaper articles and Communist propaganda, there would not be ?the slightest attack against the organisations or the leaders of the Socialist Party?.

In no time, the Stalinists had once again switched from sectarianism to the most thoroughgoing opportunism. And over the coming year the steady drift of the French Communists to the right was to become a charge.

The Communist Party extended its alliance beyond the Socialist Party to the main party of democratic capitalism in France, the corrupt and discredited Radical Party. A new policy had been born: the Popular Front.

The consequences of this policy were enormous. In May 1935 Stalin signed a treaty with the French minister Pierre Laval. In an official statement, Stalin declared that he had ?complete understanding and approval of the national defence policy pursued by France with the object of maintaining its armed forces at a level consistent with its security requirements.?

In short, Stalin now approved of French imperialism?s rearmament policy. The policy of Lenin, Liebknecht and Luxemburg of demanding ?not a penny, not a person? for the defence of imperialism, of fighting against the designs of the imperialist powers, of opposing militarism and the slaughter of imperialist war ?
all of this was given up with the flick of a pen.

France had colonial possessions in Africa and in Indochina? it subjected colonial peoples to bloody racist repression in order to loot their countries.

No matter! The French Communists fell in line: they dropped their campaigns against the government?s rearmament programme? and they dropped any pretence of being a revolutionary party in the process. The Communist International had finally crossed over to reformism.

**Against the Popular Front**

The Stalinists looked to an alliance with the ?democratic? capitalists to halt the progress of fascism in France. Trotsky looked in the opposite direction: to the working class itself.

The ICL had a small group of supporters in France, the Communist League. They numbered little more than a hundred, but a tremendous responsibility now rested on their shoulders? to rally the most advanced sections of the French working class to a revolutionary answer to the growing crisis.

The rise of fascism was not the only threat facing the French workers. It was a symptom of a deeper malaise? the decline of capitalism itself.

The reason why ever greater sections of the middle class were abandoning the Radicals and looking to the fascists was the terrible economic crisis, the corruption of the Radical Party?s ministers, the ruining of small businesses and farms by the banks, and the constant insecurity and poverty arising from the government?s attacks on wages and living standards.

During this period Trotsky was living in France. Although the French government had ordered him to leave in April, no other country would accept him. He was therefore able to devote a great deal of his attention to helping the Communist League.

This took two main forms. First, he helped in the drafting of a new programme for the French revolutionaries. Second, he developed new tactics to bring the fight for the Fourth International to broader layers of the French working class.

The ?Action Programme for France? was published in June 1934. It was designed as a guide to action for the whole working class movement.

The starting point of this programme was the deepening capitalist crisis. It explained how the capitalists had only one way out: ?still more misery for the labouring masses! Suppression of all reforms, even the most trifling! Suppression of the democratic regime!?

For these reasons, the capitalist class was being pushed towards fascism, as the only way to ?clear the organised working class from its road?. The end result of this would, Trotsky predicted, be a new world war, even more terribly destructive than the last.

Trotsky showed how the struggles of the working class to defend itself would create the possibility for the workers to take political power from the capitalists. He put forward demands that would build a bridge from resistance to revolution, and lead the workers towards establishing their own control over society.

The Action Programme rejected the reformist demand that the capitalist government should disarm the fascists. It declared:
We refuse to spread the criminal illusion that a capitalist government can actually proceed to the disarming of the capitalist bands. The exploited must defend themselves against the capitalists.

For this reason, the French Trotskyists raised the slogan of the arming of the working class and the creation of a workers' militia.

The programme ended with an appeal to the working class to fight not only the fascists, but the capitalist system that arms them and gives them strength:

Society, which can only exist by your labour, is rotting away because the ruling bourgeoisie will not give up a single one of its odious privileges. To retain them, the bourgeoisie is preparing fascist bands which threaten your existence.

On February 12 you displayed your power and your determination not to submit to this violence. But on that day your leaders betrayed you; they outlined no concrete slogan, no serious perspective of struggle for you. To attain your strength, to defend your right to live, to work no more for the enrichment of a minority of shameless exploiters? prepare your revolution, join the action of the Communist League!

The Stalinists heaped scorn on the programme of the Trotskyists. In particular they denounced the call for a workers' militia as a ?provocation? as if the attacks of the fascists would cease if only the workers refrained from resisting them! They argued that the arming of the workers was only possible in a revolutionary situation, which, as Trotsky pointed out, ?means that the workers must permit themselves to be slaughtered until the situation becomes revolutionary.?

A militia, the Stalinists insisted, would only lead to the most determined fighters being cut off from the mass of the workers? instead they called for ?mass self-defence?. Again Trotsky answered them:

But what is this ?mass self-defence? without combat organisations, without specialised cadres [officers], without arms? To give over the defence against fascism to unorganised and unprepared masses left to themselves would be to play a role incomparably lower than the role of Pontius Pilate . . . Without the support of the masses, the militia is nothing. But without organised combat detachments, the most heroic masses will be smashed bit by bit by the fascist gangs. It is nonsense to counterpose the militia to self-defence. The militia is an organ of self-defence.

The Spanish Revolution

The greatest class battle of the 1930s was the revolution and civil war in Spain. Here the forces of the working class fought a life and death battle, arms in hand, against fascism. Militants around the world rallied to the defence of the Spanish Republic.

In February 1936 the Popular Front of the Socialist and Communist Parties came to power. True to the policies of Social-Democracy and Stalinism, they chose and backed a capitalist politician, Azaña, to head the government.

But when Azaña tried to appoint a right-wing member of the Socialists, Prieto, as prime minister, the rank and file of the Socialist party rebelled against the move and they succeeded in blocking his rise to power.

By June the Spanish workers were proving that even a Popular Front government would not be enough to contain their struggles.

They launched a series of mass strikes that threw the capitalists into panic. Although the Communist Party declared full support for the government, the capitalists became convinced that only fascism and
dictatorship could save them from the revolution.

On 17 July 1936, General Francisco Franco, commander of the Spanish Army in Morocco, gave the signal for a full scale military and fascist rising against the Popular Front government. The government, true to its reformist ideas, refused to hand over arms to the only force that could stop the fascists - the working class.

Like the employers and the landlords who stood behind them, they feared the threat of revolution more than the threat of fascism. The Socialist and Communist Parties issued a joint statement, claiming that everything was in hand and could be left to the government.

But the workers did not wait. Rank and file members of the left wing of the Socialist Party, together with members of the powerful anarchist trade union CNT, armed themselves. They surrounded army barracks, broke into stores of weapons, and took guns and ammunition from the very factories where they were produced.

Less than two years earlier, Trotsky had argued that:

"The proletariat produces arms, transports them, erects the buildings in which they are kept, defends these buildings against itself, serves in the army and creates all its equipment... It is enough that the proletariat should want arms - and it will find them."

In a matter of hours, the Spanish workers proved him right. With a series of heroic actions, they blocked the fascist advance. Three years of civil war had begun.

The workers took advantage of the situation to settle accounts with the employers who had exploited them for so long. They seized the factories. All transport in the republic was placed under the control of a joint committee of the Socialist and anarchist trade unions.

At the same time, the peasants seized control of the land. Popular committees sprung up everywhere.

But still political power in the Republic rested not with workers? committees on the ground, but with the Popular Front government in Madrid. The Social Democrats and the Stalinists had a breathing space. They used it to strangle the Spanish revolution.

Instead of handing over power to the workers? and peasants? committees, the Popular Front government was determined to wrest control of the factories and the land back from the working people. Instead of recognising the workers? committees in industry, they appointed directors to take over the running of the factories.

Instead of winning the support of the peasants by granting them the land they had occupied, they tried to restore the rights of the former landowners. Instead of declaring that the Spanish colony of Morocco should have the right to independence, the government refused to end colonial rule.

In this way they failed to hold the support of the poor and the oppressed peoples. Franco?s fascist regime grew strong in rural areas, his troops remained based in Morocco, and as the months went by, the enthusiasm and energy of the anti-fascist fighters was slowly sapped as the government deprived them of the gains they had been fighting for.

The Communist Party came forward as the most committed defender of the Popular Front and the most determined enemy of the workers? revolution. All of this fitted perfectly with Stalin?s theory of Socialism in One Country.
The whole policy was based on Stalin’s hopes for an alliance with French, British and US imperialism. Anything that would anger or repel them - such as workers’ revolution in Spain - had to be avoided at all costs. Instead of revolution, the Stalinists hoped to beat fascism in Spain by making a permanent alliance with ‘anti-fascist’ sections of the capitalist class.

The Communist Party raised the slogan ‘First Win the War!’ This sounded very practical - but in reality it meant that all the gains of the workers and peasants had to be reversed. The Stalinists hoped to keep the support of the ‘democratic’ capitalists by proving that they could stop the revolution just as effectively as Franco.

Diaz, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party, said in March 1937 that land seizures, collectivisation of agriculture and the confiscation of the property of the rich were ‘not only undesirable, but absolutely impermissible’.

The Communist Party was to play a role in Spain exactly like the Mensheviks in Russia or the Social Democrats in Germany. Any move beyond democracy to socialist revolution was to be opposed. This dug the grave of the anti-fascist struggle as well as the socialist revolution. In the end, the capitalists were quite willing to surrender democracy and continue to make a fortune by exploiting the workers.

It was only the workers and poor peasants who had a real and lasting interest in defeating Franco. By rolling back the workers’ revolution, the Stalinists were only ensuring the victory of Franco in the civil war.

With vast resources flowing in from Moscow, with an army of Comintern functionaries, secret police and propagandists, the Stalinists secured a virtual stranglehold on the government’s policy for the crucial months of the war.

When the Socialists in the government considered granting Trotsky the right to asylum in Spain, the USSR threatened to withdraw its backing for the Republic!

The Communist Party pushed for the dissolution of the revolutionary committees that had sprung up at rank and file level, and fought for an end to democracy in the workers’ militias, converting them from a revolutionary Red Army back to a capitalist style army with privileges for officers.

And most important of all, they began a campaign of extermination against those left-wingers who supported the workers’ revolution. In December 1936 the Soviet paper Pravda threatened that in Spain: ‘...the purging of the Trotskyists and the Anarcho-Syndicalists has begun; it will be conducted with the same energy as it was in the USSR.’

After sabotaging a united fight against the Nazis in Germany, the Stalinists were now going a massive step further. They were to drown the Spanish revolution in blood.

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