

On the 60th Anniversary of the Victory over Nazi Germany

On the Character of the Second World War

Rajani Palme Dutt

This article tackles a question which frequently comes up: namely, how Stalin's appraisal of February 9th 1946 that the Second World War was a war of liberation from the very beginning squares with the characterisation of the period from September 1939 to June 1941 as a period of inter-imperialist war. R.P. Dutt convincingly argues that the question of fascism and imperialist war had come to the fore from the early 1930s onwards so that Stalin's characterisation of 1946 had to be seen in that context. The interview below on this question emerged from a wide-ranging discussion with party workers during the visit of R.P. Dutt to the CPI headquarters in Mumbai in 1946 during the course of his visit to India.

Vijay Singh

QUESTION: STALIN in his speech on February 9 said: 'In view of this, as distinct from the First World War, the Second World War from the very outset assumed the nature of an anti-Fascist war, a war of liberation, one of the tasks of which was also to re-establish democratic liberties. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war could only strengthen – and actually did strengthen – the anti-Fascist and liberating character of the Second World War.'¹

Does this, therefore, mean that the characterisation of the war as an Imperialist war from 1939 September to 1941 June (a characterisation made both by the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of Great Britain) is wrong?

R.P. Dutt's Reply: We had that question in England too but it has aroused no mass interest. I do not know what your experience has been.

It is not a major issue. But it is a historical question, and it is necessary that there should be no confusion on it.

If you look at Stalin's speech carefully, it is perfectly clear what he says. He shows the general character of the whole period through which we have lived, the two world wars. He shows how both the world wars rose out of the conditions of Capitalism and Imperialism, but how in the Second World War there was an all-important new factor, Fascism, which was decisive for the character of the Second World War. The Second World War, therefore was basically and from the very outset, a struggle of liberation of the peoples against Fascism.

If we compare this with the historical facts, the truth of it is perfectly plain.

When Did It Begin?

When did the Second World War begin? Everybody knows it did not begin in 1939. It began before that. The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, published, I believe, in 1937, contained an analysis of the Second World War and reference to it as such.²

We are all aware how we have traced its development right from its inception over Manchuria in 1931, growing and expanding from that to Abyssinia, to Spain, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and broadening out into the character of a full world war.³

It is perfectly clear that the struggle of the Chinese people against the attack of Japanese Fascism, already beginning from 1931 in Manchuria and extending to China as a whole in 1937, was an anti-Fascist people's struggle.

The struggle of the Abyssinian people, supported by the international progressive forces all over the world, against Italian Fascism was a liberation struggle against Fascism.

The struggle of the Spanish Republic against German and Italian Fascism, beginning from the summer of 1936 and drawing upon itself all the forces of the world on either side was a highly developed international struggle against Fascism.

Sept. '39 to June '41 – Merely a Phase

In the course of this entire development, a phase arose in September 1939 when CHAMBERLAIN and DALADIER declared war on Hitler, not for the purpose of carrying forward the struggle against Fascism, but in fact in pursuance of their same line of policy that they were already pursuing from Munich onwards, that is, to turn Germany from the West to the East.

The reactionary character of their policy was shown by the complete passivity in relation to Germany and the concentration of their military preparations through Finland for war on the Soviet Union, which was only prevented by the speed with which the Red Army broke the Mannerheim Line.

All this was one phase, one episode within the Second World War. It was an episode entirely expressing Anglo-French Imperialist policy, basically anti-democratic, basically anti-Soviet, and having nothing in common with the anti-Fascist liberation struggle of the peoples.

That Imperialist episode ended in the most disastrous consequences, with the over-running of Europe by Nazism. But from this arose the further consequence – the rise of the liberation struggle in Europe through the resistance movements led by Communist Parties against the Nazi occupying forces.

For Britain a very considerable point of danger was reached from the summer of 1940 onwards in consequence of the Munichite and Imperialist anti-Soviet policy that had been pursued.

United Struggle of All Peoples Against Fascism

As a result when the opportunity came in June 1941 for the alliance to be reached with the Soviet Union, the same Britain which two years earlier had rejected that alliance when offered by the Soviet Union, now with the complete agreement of all political parties and sections immediately seized the chance of that alliance.

Thus, there at last developed the full and united struggle of all peoples against Fascism and the victory over Fascism, for which we Communists had striven consistently from the outset.

That is the total character of the development of the Second World War, the historical character of which was this liberation struggle of the peoples against Fascism and within which the Imperialist phase of the war, the reactionary policy and ‘phoney war’ of Anglo-French Imperialism in 1939, is one episode and not the beginning of the war.

Characterisation by C.I.

One further point. The question refers to the characterisation of the Imperialist phase of the war in 1939 as if it had only been made by the Communist Parties of India and Great Britain.

In point of fact this characterisation was made by the Communist International in the Manifesto of the Executive Committee of the Communist International in October 1939, and repeated by them in their May Day Manifesto of 1940.⁴

Stalin’s speech makes no proposal to revise the basic policy and decision of the Communist International with regard to this phase of the war.

On the contrary, the significance of Stalin’s speech is that it brings out clearly that important phase of history which developed through those years and which the attempts of the Imperialists either through Munich in 1938 or through their declaration of war in 1939 and their anti-Soviet preparations through Finland, were unable to turn aside.

That seems to me to be the plain answer to that question.

From: ‘People’s Age’, Bombay, 5th May 1946.

Notes

(1) This is a slightly different wording from the text which was circulated later, ‘...In view of this, the second world war against the Axis powers, unlike the first world war, assumed from the very outset the character of an anti-fascist war, a war of liberation, one of the tasks of which was to restore democratic liberties. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war against the Axis powers could only augment – and really did augment – the anti-fascist and liberating character of the second world war’. J. Stalin, ‘Speech at an Election Meeting’, 9th February 1946, ‘Works’, Vol. 16, London, 1986, p. 72.

(2) The ‘History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course’ was actually published in 1938. See J. Stalin, ‘Works’, Volume 18, Red Star Press, London, 1976. Chapter Twelve (pp. 331-335) refers to the Second Imperialist War arising from the aggression of the three axis powers of Japan, Italy and Germany in the period 1935-38.

(3) See R. Palme Dutt, ‘World Politics 1918-1936’, first edition 1936, second edition, Adhar Prakashan, Patna, 1961.

(4) See (Ed.) Jane Degras, ‘The Communist International 1919-1943’, Volume 3, 1929-1943, Frank Cass, London, 1971, pp. 439-448 and pp.462-470.

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NOTE 1: ECCI Secretariat Directive on the Outbreak of War, 8th September, 1939

G.M. Dimitrov

The current war is imperialist and unjust. The bourgeoisie of all the warring states is to be held responsible for it. This war cannot be supported by the working class of these countries, not to mention its communist parties. This war is not waged against fascism by the bourgeoisie despite the affirmations of Chamberlain and the leaders of social-democracy. This war takes place between two groups of capitalist countries for world domination. The international proletariat should not defend fascist Poland which had refused the assistance of the Soviet Union and which oppresses other nationalities.

The communist parties are against the Munichites since they always wanted to create a genuine anti-fascist front with the participation of the USSR, but the bourgeoisie of England and France pushed aside the USSR in order to wage a war of pillage.

This war has radically changed the situation: the division of the capitalist states between fascist and democratic is not in force any longer. As a result it is necessary to change tactics. The tactics of the communist party of the belligerent countries at this point is to expose its imperialist character, have communist deputies vote against war credits, tell the masses that the war will give nothing but privation and suffering. In the neutral countries the communist parties should expose those governments who on the one hand remain neutral in their country but on the other support the war in other countries in order to take advantage of it, as the government of the USA does with respect to Japan and China. The communist parties of all countries should be on the offensive against the treacherous stand of social-democracy. The communist parties, specially the French, American, and Belgian, who oppose these directives should immediately correct their political line.

Dimitrov
8.9.39

A.N. Gordienko: 'Iosif Stalin', Minsk, 1998, pp. 281-82, from 'Komintern i vtoraya mirovaya voina', Part I, Moscow, 1994, Translated from the Russian by 'Inter'. This Document is also available in Bulgarian: Georgi Dimitrov, 'Dnevnik', Sofia, 1997, pp. 182-83.

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NOTE 2 : FROM: **Speech at an Election Meeting; Stalin Election District, Moscow; February 9, 1946; J. Stalin**

It would be wrong to think that the Second World War broke out accidentally, or as a result of blunders committed by certain statesmen, although blunders were certainly committed. As a matter of fact, the war broke out as the inevitable result of the development of world economic and political forces on the basis of present day monopolistic capitalism. Marxists have more than once stated that the capitalist system of world economy contains the elements of universal crises and military conflicts, that, in view of this, the development of world capitalism in our times does not proceed smoothly and evenly, but through crises and war catastrophes. The point is that the uneven development of capitalist countries usually leads, in the course of time, to a sharp disturbance of the equilibrium within the world system of capitalism, and that group of capitalist countries which regards itself as being less securely provided with raw materials and markets usually attempts to change the situation and to redistribute "spheres of influence" in its own favour – by employing armed force. As a result of this, the capitalist world is split into two hostile camps, and war breaks out between them.

Perhaps war catastrophes could be avoided if it were possible periodically to redistribute raw materials and markets among the respective countries in conformity with their economic weight – by means of concerted and peaceful decisions. But this is impossible under the present capitalist conditions of world economic development.

Thus, as a result of the first crisis of the capitalist system of world economy, the First World War broke out; and as a result of the second crisis, the Second World War broke out.

This does not mean, of course, that the Second World War was a copy of the first. On the contrary, the Second World War differed substantially in character from the first. It must be borne in mind that before attacking the Allied countries the major fascist states – Germany, Japan and Italy – destroyed the last vestiges of bourgeois-democratic liberties at home and established there a cruel, terroristic regime, trampled upon the principle of sovereignty and free development of small countries, proclaimed as their own the policy of seizing foreign territory and publicly stated that they were aiming at world domination and the spreading of the fascist regime all over the world; and by seizing Czechoslovakia and the central regions of China, the Axis Powers showed that they were ready to carry out their threat to enslave all the peace-loving peoples. In view of this, the Second World War against the Axis Powers, unlike the First World War, assumed from the very

outset the character of an anti-fascist war, a war of liberation, one of the tasks of which was to restore democratic liberties. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war against the Axis Powers could only augment – and really did augment – the anti-fascist and liberating character of the Second World War.

It was on this basis that the anti-fascist coalition of the Soviet Union, the United States of America, Great Britain and other freedom-loving countries came into being and later played the decisive role in defeating the armed forces of the Axis Powers.

That is how it stands with the question of the origin and character of the Second World War.