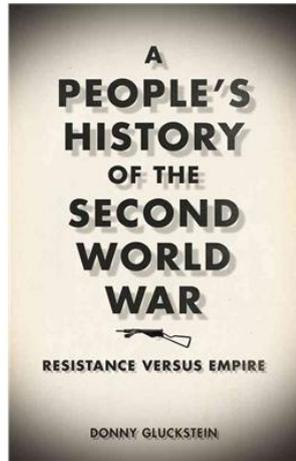


Review: Donny Gluckstein, *A People's History of the Second World War*

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Donny Gluckstein, *A People's History of the Second World War*, Pluto Press, London 2012, £15.00

The Second World War Revisited

Donny Gluckstein has produced a fascinating and important Marxist analysis of the Second World War. As one might expect the starting point of the book is a critique of the dominant, ie ruling class, narrative of the War as an almost uniquely 'good' war waged by the Allies for freedom and democracy against the unspeakably evil Nazi regime and its allies. This view, which permeates and underpins not only mainstream history but also innumerable popular novels, newspaper articles, films, TV documentaries and so on, is systematically demolished by Gluckstein.

In a way it is easy for him to do this because, despite its ubiquity, it is a myth that will not withstand contact with numerous well established facts: the fact that none of the western 'democracies' were willing to aid the anti-fascist struggle in

Spain; the fact that Churchill openly declared his admiration for Mussolini and that he was fighting to defend the British Empire; the fact that America did not enter the war till it was attacked by Japan at Pearl Harbour (ie until its vital interests were threatened); the fact that America and Britain fire-bombed Dresden and Tokyo and nuked Hiroshima and Nagasaki but never attempted to bomb the railway lines to Auschwitz or to take any action to prevent the holocaust, although they were well aware of what was happening.

Nevertheless, in the course of making his case, Gluckstein provides numerous illuminating summaries of revealing (and shocking) episodes from the War which, if not unknown are certainly not widely known. For example in relation to India he records:

On 3 September 1939 Indians woke to discover they were at war. London did not bother to ask for approval, unlike Dominions such as Canada or Australia. When Churchill told the Commons that India has a great part to play in the worlds struggle for freedom that did not include independence for Indias 400 million, a population that exceeded the maximum number conquered by the Third Reich.

One consequence of the 'struggle for freedom' was the Bengal famine of 1943It consumed between 1.5 and 3.5 million lives despite civil servants describing the previous harvest

as ‘a good one’ This continued an appalling record 12 major famines since colonisation began. In the 1860s an Indian economist had discovered the basic cause: a sum greater than the sub-continent’s land value was drained off annually to support British occupation and profits.

The 1943 famine was directly connected to India’s involvement in the Second World War, because after it began eleven times the usual number of soldiers were maintained at the country’s expense.,

Field Marshall Wavell [Viceroy of India] pointed out ‘the very different attitude towards feeding a starving population when there is starvation in Europe’.

Churchill was unabashedly sending food amounted to ‘appeasement’ of the Congress Party. The official record notes that the Canadian PM had 100,000 tons of grain loaded on a ship bound for India but was ‘dissuaded by a strong personal appeal from Winston’ from sending it. ¹

Similarly in Vietnam in 1945, then ruled by De Gaulle’s Free French government in Paris via Governor-General Jean Decoux, a racist Petainist whose services were retained by De Gaulle when Vichy fell.

So the Free French government must take responsibility for Tonkin’s famine of 1945

French army shipped ten or more boatloads of rice out of the affected area every day. Estimates of the death toll reach up to two millions. ²

In relation to Yugoslavia Gluckstein records how the Allies persistently supported Colonel Mikhailovich’s monarchist Chetniks against the real (Communist led) partisans, despite the fact that the Chetniks spent more time fighting the partisans than they did resisting the Nazis. And in relation to Greece he tells how when the Nazi occupation collapsed and most of the country was in the hands of the Communist led EAM/ELAS resistance Churchill immediately sent British troops to intervene. Again here are some extracts from Gluckstein’s account.

George Papandreu, the Greek Prime Minister, wished to participate in this enterprise. He wrote to Churchill ‘Only the immediate appearance of impressive British forces in Greece will suffice to alter the situation’. The telegram was sent just three weeks after the formation of the ‘Government of National Unity’ with EAM members included as ministers!

However, such was their contempt for all Greeks that the British decided to carry off the coup alone. Churchill’s view was that ‘it was most desirable to strike out of the blue the Greek government know nothing of this plan and on no account should be told anything.’

¹Gluckstein pp163-5.

²ibid pp.195

This was not a simple policing operation as claimed, but classic imperialism. The British wanted to dominate a foreign land Churchill told General Scobie: 'Do not hesitate to fire at any armed male in Athens who assails the British authority Act as if you were in a conquered city where a local rebellion is in progress'

By the time the 'December events' were over there were 50,000 Greek dead and 2000 British casualties.³

Gluckstein also shows how the Indonesian people, in order to win their national independence after centuries of colonisation, had to overcome successive assaults by Japanese, British and Dutch armed forces⁴ and, very tellingly, how when Germany capitulated the Allied forces preferred cooperating with Nazis to handing power to the Antifas (anti-fascist organisations) that had sprung to life as the Nazi regime crumbled. He quotes an American GI there at the time.

The crime of it all is that we would take a little town, arrest the mayor and the other big shots and put the anti-fascist in charge of the town. We'd double back to that town three days later, the Americans had freed all the officials and put 'em back in power. And they threw this other guy aside. Invariably it happened.⁵

By an accumulation of such evidence Gluckstein builds an overwhelmingly convincing case that the British and US ruling

classes (and the French as represented by De Gaulle) fought not out of anti-fascist principle, nor for 'democracy' or 'freedom', but for their own capitalist and imperialist interests, and this determined not only the fact that they went to war but also shaped the manner in which they waged it.

Nor does Gluckstein exempt the Soviet Union from this critique. Rather he argues that the Stalinist regime was just as imperialist as in its approach to the war and to smaller countries as Churchill and Roosevelt. A particularly clear example of this is provided by the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Again I will quote directly.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 [was] a deal whose secret protocols divided Poland between Germany and Russia. The Nazis had murdered many thousands of German communists. All this was brushed aside, the Soviet Union providing Hitler with vital raw materials in return for weapons. When the re-conquest of Poland commenced, the Russians left the Wehrmacht to carry on the fighting, thus minimising their own risks and masking their avarice. The Nazis were asked to indicate 'as nearly as possible when they could count on the capture of Warsaw' as this would be the signal for Russia to grab its share. Once the fighting was over, Stalin held 52 per cent of Polish territory, and Hitler 48 per cent. Both agreed they would tolerate 'no Polish agitation which affects the terri-

³ibid pp50-52

⁴ibid pp.187-92

⁵quoted ibid p.134

⁶ibid pp56-7

tories of the other party'.⁶

As Gluckstein points out the Russian occupation of Eastern Poland did not match the utter savagery of the Nazis (that would have been a very hard task) but it was still brutal, including the massacre of several thousand Polish officers at Katyn and the deportation of 9 per cent of the population as forced labour.

This imperialist behaviour was also practiced in the Baltic states (Gluckstein devotes a section to Latvia) and in relation to whole of Eastern Europe at the end of the War. Gluckstein naturally records the infamous cynical carving up of Europe by Churchill and Stalin at their meeting in October 1944 ⁷.

The People's War

However, this demonstration of the imperialist character of the struggle between the Allies and the Axis powers is only the one aspect of Gluckstein's book. It is his central argument that this imperialist was accompanied by a 'People's War' which ran parallel to it. 'The events of the 1939 to 1945 period did not constitute a single combat against the Axis powers, but amounted to two distinct wars' [p.5]

This People's War develops from below and is a popular mobilisation against fascism, imperialism and oppression which generates demands for radical social change. It includes, in Gluckstein's account, the anti-Nazi resistance movements in Occupied Europe, the popular anti-fascist mood among working people in Britain, the development of a fight against racism in the US army and wider society, the struggles against imperialism (British, Japanese, French, Dutch) in India, Vietnam, Indonesia and China.

Indeed the structure of the book is determined by its focus on those places where the 'parallel wars' are both manifest or come into conflict and one of its most attractive and useful features is the accounts it provides (brief, but as detailed as his limited space permitted) of the various resistance movements and their exceptionally difficult and heroic struggles. It is particularly interesting to learn, without having to consult specialist academic monographs, the guts of what occurred in seldom written about places such as Indonesia and Vietnam (during the World War, that is).

While there is no doubt at all about the reality and importance of the phenomena noted by Gluckstein namely the existence of popular anti-fascist mobilisations with fundamentally different motivations from the war aims of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin there are, I think, significant problems in his conceptualisation of them as a 'People's War' to which I will return. First I want to consider why he felt need to develop the concept.

The reason, in my opinion, is that simply designating the Second World War as an imperialist war, the same as or similar to the First World War, leads to a huge problem. In 1914 Lenin and all the socialists who remained true to internationalism (Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Trotsky, McLean, Connolly etc) denounced the War and opposed their own governments. But how can applying the same analysis and position be reconciled with the need for resistance to fascism in general and the Nazis in particular, which I am sure every socialist feels in their bones. It is to deal with this difficulty that Gluckstein advances the notion of a People's War and I completely sympathise with his motivation for so doing. Unfortunately it doesn't really work.

⁷ibid pp.4-5

First, Gluckstein doesn't succeed in giving a clear definition of what he means by People's War. He himself acknowledges it is 'problematic as an idea and might appear insufficiently rigorous'⁸ and he is not able to distinguish it satisfactorily from national war or class war **all** wars have a class content and are, in some sense, manifestations of class struggle, and most national wars have a social dimension to them (certainly wars of national liberation do).

Second, his concept of 'two distinct wars' or 'two parallel wars' involves the notion of a **single** Peoples War but it is not really plausible to describe the resistance struggles in Europe and the anti-imperialist struggles in Asia as part of a single war or the same war except in so far as they are aspects of the Second World War as a whole. Nor is it convincing to speak of distinct Peoples War in Britain or the USA where no separate armed forces or fighting takes place, except in the very broadest sense of the people's war that is waged throughout the history of class society. In other words he tries to stretch the term too far and ends up shoe-horning struggles into it which don't fit.

Third, Gluckstein refers on a number of occasions to the existence of 'parallel wars' but his own analysis shows that far from running in parallel these different struggles both intersect and, at times, sharply conflict with one another.

Donny writes, on the same page:

There was such a thing as the Second World War, so its underlying character can and should be investigated. And the discovery of parallel wars within it shows, to use the language of dialectics, that the

Second World War represented a 'unity of opposites'.

And

What was unique about the Second World War was that these tensions amounted to parallel wars rather than tensions within the same war.⁹

There is inconsistency here: a dialectical 'unity of opposites' exists within a single whole and is not the same as two distinct (parallel) wars.

Finally if I am right in surmising that Gluckstein developed the People's War argument to deal with the difficulties involved in simply denouncing the whole Second World War as an imperialist war then this raises the question of what was (and is) the correct political line for socialists to take in relation to the war. Perhaps surprisingly Gluckstein does not deal directly with this question but I shall address it now.

The Socialist Attitude

At the time there were four main positions on the war taken by tendencies within the international working class movement: the position of the social democrats and reformists, the two positions taken by the Stalinist Communist Parties and the position of Trotsky and the Trotskyists.

The social democrats gave more or less uncritical support to the Allied side in the War. In the case of the British Labour Party they formed a coalition government with Churchill's Tories and accepted the notion of a political truce during the war, including of course opposing strikes etc. However, since 1914, social democrats have pretty much always supported imperialist

⁸ibid p.12

⁹ibid p.208

wars (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq etc) so this need not detain us here.

At the outbreak of the War in 1939, the Communist Parties took the position that it was an inter-imperialist war to which they were completely opposed. Then, after Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, the CPs performed a complete about turn and became enthusiastic supporters of the Allied cause. In both cases their position was determined not by the interests of the working class or by independent Marxist analysis but by orders from Moscow on the basis of the interests of the Russian state. From 1939 to 1941, when Russia was allied to Germany in the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Anglo-French imperialism was treated as the main enemy and criticism of Nazi Germany was muted, but when Russia was at war with Germany, Germany and its allies became the enemy and criticism of British and French imperialism was abandoned.

Two further comments need to be made in relation to these positions. The initial anti-war position of 1939-41 was itself an about turn from the anti-fascist Popular Front strategy of 1934-39 and cut very much against the grain of rank-and-file Communists. It was only imposed from above with great difficulty. In contrast the post 1941 anti-fascist line was much more in accord with the instincts of Communist workers and in occupied Europe those Communists formed the core of the resistance movements in which they fought with great heroism. (It was this that laid the basis for the mass CPs in Italy, France etc in the post war period).

At the same time the fact that the turn was orchestrated and controlled by Moscow meant that in Britain the CP supported the Churchill Government, opposed all strikes, and denounced all left wing opposition and worker militancy as 'Trotskyite fascism'. In occupied Europe it meant that the revolutionary poten-

tial in the resistance movements, the very real possibility of developing the struggle against fascist occupation into a struggle for socialism, was squandered and crushed - again on orders from Moscow.

The fourth, Trotskyist, position treated the Second World War as essentially a continuation of the First World War and opposed on the same grounds as a struggle for imperialist division and redivision of the world.

The present war, the second imperialist war, is not an accident; it does not result from the will of this or that dictator. It was predicted long ago. It derived its origin inexorably from the contradictions of international capitalist interests. The immediate cause of the present war is the rivalry between the old wealthy colonial empires, Great Britain and France, and the belated imperialist plunderers, Germany and Italy.

Against the reactionary slogan of 'national defense' it is necessary to advance the slogan of the revolutionary destruction of the national state. To the madhouse of capitalist Europe it is necessary to counterpose the program of the Socialist United States of Europe as a stage on the road to the Socialist United States of the World.

No less a lie is the slogan of a war for democracy against fascism. As if the workers have forgotten that the British government helped Hitler and his hangman's crew gain power!

The imperialist democracies are in reality the greatest aris-

tocracies in history. England, France, Holland, Belgium rest on the enslavement of colonial peoples. The democracy of the United States rests upon the seizure of the vast wealth of an entire continent.¹⁰

To this must be added that the Trotskyists were not neutral between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Because they considered that the USSR was still a workers state despite its Stalinist degeneration they gave it unconditional support in War. However, they argued that the successful defense of the USSR required the overthrow of the Stalin regime. Moreover, most Trotskyists supported and participated in the anti-fascist resistance movements (which mainly developed after Trotsky's death).

For both Donny Gluckstein and the author of this review the Trotskyist tradition is our tradition and therefore out of the four positions outlined here it this one that forms our mutual initial point of reference. However it is precisely this 'orthodox' Trotskyist position that I think needs to be amended and revised.

The change I propose is that despite the fact, amply documented by Gluckstein, that the Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin governments and the ruling classes they represented (I do not accept the notion that Russia was still a workers' state), fought the war for their own imperialist interests and not for democracy or anti-fascist principle, it was nevertheless in the interests of the working class internationally that Nazi Germany and its fascist allies were militarily defeated. To put the matter sharply and clearly I think that revolutionary socialists should not have been neutral on D-Day or at Stalingrad.

In support of this it should be noted that the position of neutrality or a 'plague on both houses' appears to have had no serious resonance with any of the working classes in any of the belligerent countries. Whereas in the First World War initial war fever steadily waned as the war developed and turned eventually into outright revolutionary opposition (in Russia and Germany), no such process occurred anywhere in the Second World War. On the contrary the large scale radicalisation that took place did so as part of pursuing the war **against** the Axis.

Moreover working class instincts and inclinations were objectively correct in this. Neither they at the time, nor we with hindsight, can be indifferent to the consequences of Nazi/fascist victory. It would have been an utter catastrophe for all the workers of Europe and very possibly the world. Fascism destroyed all independent working class organization in Italy, Germany and Spain. Had Hitler and co. won they would have done the same everywhere else. The Nazis murdered 6 million Jews, 20 million or so Russians, up to 500,000 Roma, millions of Poles and so on. If they had won how many more would they have exterminated? It is true, as we have seen, that Roosevelt, Churchill and co were not fighting an anti-fascist war in the sense that they were motivated by opposition to fascism but objectively, whatever their motives, they were fighting fascist regimes and it is a simple fact that the victory of the Allies resulted in the demolition of the fascist regimes and the restoration, at least in Western Europe, of bourgeois democracy.

A further point relates to socialist participation in the resistance movements. Surely the correctness of this cannot be doubted. Certainly this is the implica-

¹⁰Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/emergconf/fi-emerg02.htm>

tion of everything in Gluckstein's book and Ernest Mandel is correct when he writes:

It is true that if the leadership of that mass resistance remained in the hands of bourgeois nationalists, of Stalinists or social democrats, it could eventually be sold out to the Western imperialists. It was the duty of the revolutionaries to prevent this from happening by trying to oust these fakery from the leadership of the movement. But it was impossible to prevent such a betrayal by abstaining from participating in that movement.

What lay behind [the resistance -JM]It was the inhuman conditions which existed in the occupied countries. How can anyone doubt that?... People did not fight because they were chauvinists. People were fighting because they were hungry, because they were over-exploited, because there were mass deportations of slave labour to Germany, because there was mass slaughter, because there were concentration camps, because there was no right to strike, because unions were banned, because communists, socialists and trade unionists were being put in prison.

... And you have to answer the question: was it a just struggle, or was it wrong to rise against this over-exploitation and oppression? **Who can seriously argue that the working**

class of Western or Eastern Europe should have abstained or remained passive towards the horrors of Nazi oppression and Nazi occupation? That position is indefensible. [My emphasis JM] ¹¹

But in no case not in France, not in Italy, not in Norway, nor in Poland or Greece or Yugoslavia were the resistance movements neutral between the Allies and the fascists. In every case they favoured Allied victory and for obvious reasons. If one takes the 'pure' anti-imperialist war position to its logical conclusion would it not have been necessary to argue inside the French Resistance (and in Britain) that the D-Day landings should be opposed on the grounds that they were an imperialist invasion and the American and British armies were just as much enemies of the French people as the Nazi occupiers?

To fill out my argument and to guard against possible misunderstanding or misrepresentation I want to stress that my position does not involve or imply any political support for the Roosevelt, Churchill or Stalin governments or any mitigation or limitation of the class struggle against them. On the contrary precisely the class and imperialist nature of these governments would have meant that socialists should have placed no confidence in their ability to wage a consistent anti-fascist war and that it was necessary for the working class to overthrow these governments and ruling classes in the interest of the class itself and the anti-fascist struggle. A revolutionary workers government in Britain, America or Russia would have been able to summon the whole working class internationally (including the German working

¹¹Ernest Mandel, *Trotskyists and the Resistance in World War Two*. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1976/xx/trots-ww2.htm>

class) to a revolutionary uprising and war against fascism.

This position would also have provided the foundation for every day concrete agitation and propaganda on a host of issues about the way the war was being fought from war profiteering and the privileges of the rich, to bomb shelters for the workers, to decent pay and conditions in the factories, to attacks on the officer class, to equality for women and their role in the war, to anti-racism in the armed forces and elsewhere, to real support for the resistance movements (the Yugoslav partisans not the Chetniks, the French fighters on the ground not De Gaulle, the Warsaw Uprising and so on), to solidarity with the anti-colonial struggle in India and elsewhere, to raising the whole argument about what sort of society the war was being fought for no return to the thirties etc. Indeed in so far as Trotskyist revolutionaries were able to engage actively with workers during the war it was largely through agitation of this sort but this agitation would have flowed more coherently from the position I have outlined than from an abstract equal condemnation of both sides.

In the colonial countries it would have been necessary to argue, in opposition to the Communist Parties, against any idea of deferring the struggle for independence. Clearly a risen and free India, and even more so a workers' India, would have been a huge assistance to the struggle against Fascism and an infinitely harder country for Japan or Germany to subdue than an India still subjugated by Britain. None of this involves accepting the idea of the Second World War as a 'good war'. The war was a catastrophe for humanity, costing 50-60 million lives, involving innumerable atrocities on all sides and giving birth to

nuclear weapons and the Cold War which put in question the whole survival of the human race. It would obviously have been enormously preferable if fascism had been prevented from coming to power or overthrown by means of the class struggle and revolution, without resort to international war (and the likes of Churchill, Roosevelt and especially Stalin, bore a huge responsibility for preventing that from happening). We would not therefore have agitated in favour of war in advance¹². Only once the war had broken out did it become necessary to say that the working class was not indifferent to the outcome.

A Note on Precedents

The main reason why the Trotskyist movement took the position it did was, in my opinion, because it saw the Second World War through the prism of the First. The social democratic betrayal of August 1914 was so etched into the consciousness of Trotsky and his followers that it seemed that their first duty in 1939 was to avoid any repetition of that collapse into social patriotism by repeating the formulae of Lenin and Liebknecht. However there are other historical precedents that are also useful to take into account.

The Spanish Civil War is one. In particular it shows how it was possible for revolutionaries to place themselves on one side (that of the Republic) militarily without giving the Republican government political support and while arguing for its overthrow in order to win the war against the fascists. Obviously the Second World War was not 'the same' as the Spanish Civil War but in this respect a similar approach could have been taken.

Another precedent is the American Civil War. As is well known Marx gave

¹²In this context it is worth saying that I do not think that in neutral countries such as Ireland or in South America, socialists should have called for joining in the War.

clear support to the North and such is the authority of Marx that this has subsequently gone unchallenged. But could not all the kind of arguments deployed against giving military support to the Allies have also been used to justify neutrality or equal condemnation of the Republic and the Confederacy. Lincoln and the Republican government were themselves deeply racist and opposed to black equality (true). Lincoln did not go to war to free the slaves but to preserve the Union in the interests of US capitalism (true). The whole of the US, not just the South, was built on slavery and complicit in it (true). The whole of the US, north and south, was built on the expropriation and extermination of the Native Americans and so on. Yet despite all these considerations Marx rightly took the view that essence of the conflict was over the continuation and possible extension of slavery and that therefore it was in the interests of the class that the south should be defeated.

Also of interest is the case of the Paris Commune. The Commune the first experiment in workers' power grew out of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71. The war was initiated by the French Emperor, Louis Napoleon III, who fell into a trap laid for him by the Prussian Chancellor Bismarck and launched an attack on Prussia. All genuine socialists denounced this reactionary imperialist adventure. But when

Napoleon III was defeated the Prussian army went on to occupy large parts of France and lay siege to Paris inflicting extreme hardship on the people. This was opposed by socialists in Germany. Then the event that sparked the rising was the attempt by the French government, at the behest of the German occupiers, to disarm the Parisian people by removing the guns of the National Guard from Montmartre. In this way an imperialist war turned through intermediate stages into its opposite a workers' revolution.

Finally a recommendation

How much of this argument Donny Gluckstein would agree with I don't know. On the basis of his book my guess is that he agrees with some of it, if not my doubts about his concept of two 'parallel wars'. However, I tend to think that if Gluckstein had clearly formulated the need to take sides in the war, he would not have needed the 'parallel people's war' idea and could instead have treated the Second World War as a single whole with many intersecting and conflicting wars and class struggles.

Be that as it may, Gluckstein's book is both interesting and highly thought provoking a must read for socialists and Marxists engaged with the momentous history of the twentieth century. I strongly recommend it.