

Old Pamphlet Revisited on Red Books Day 2023

The Empire and the War

With a preface by Vijay Prashad



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ONE PENNY

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Preface: Imperialism's Hunger for War

Vijay Prashad¹

In February 1940, Rajani Palme Dutt made a remarkable statement in *Inside the Empire*: 'Between the British working class and the colonial peoples there is complete unity of interest. The common enemy is British imperialism'. This sentence should not be misread. Dutt, who was a leading theoretician of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and was enormously influential in the Communist Party of India (CPI), meant that there was an objective 'unity of interest' between the working-class in Britain and the peoples in the colonies in so far as the emancipation of both was being blocked by the structure of British imperialism. It is not that the sections of the British working-class did not benefit from imperialism, sections which Lenin had called the 'labour aristocracy', but that the advancement of the interests of the British working-class was being arrested by imperialism and that one illustration of this was the use of the imperial wealth by the British state to block any attempt by the trade union movement to extend the rights of the workers (which had become apparent in the aftermath of the 1926 General Strike, which resulted in the Trade Dispute and Trade Unions Act of 1927, which banned the possibility of a general strike thereafter). This structural barrier

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for the British workers was what Dutt raised up to show their ‘unity of interest’ with the colonial peoples, whose fight for liberation was met with the full force of violence by British imperialism.

Dutt’s essay was written during the period when imperialist Britain — due to its alliances in Europe — had been driven into a war with an expansionist Nazi regime in Germany. At this time, in February 1940, the USSR remained outside the war, being aware that any precipitous entry into the war would not have been possible for a country that had not yet built up its defences. The Soviets had played an important role in the fight to defend the Spanish Republic against fascist forces, and the Communists around the world had been at the forefront of the struggles against fascism (with the epicentre of these battles being in Italy and Germany). Defeats in Spain (on 1 April 1939) and in Italy and Germany had led the Soviet leadership to sue for time (that lasted from 23 August 1939 to 22 June 1941). It is important to note that in this twenty-two month period Communists such as Dutt — the author of *Fascism and Social Revolution* (1934) — did not cease to attack fascism, and in 1941, Dutt wrote an important pamphlet — *Turning Point for the World* — in which he argued that the USSR did not spend the two years of the ‘ceasefire’ with fascism silently but it built up its military and economic resources in preparation for an anticipated Nazi attack and awaited an alliance with the Western powers which they had delayed despite overtures from the Soviets. Once the Nazis attacked the USSR, the Soviets joined in the war and it was only then that the British, for instance, agreed to an Anglo-Soviet alliance against the Nazis (on 12 July 1941). It is important to rehearse this history to make the context of this pamphlet — *The Empire and the War* (June

1940) — clear, so that there is no vilification of the general argument made here against British imperialism and its role in the destabilisation of the world in the lead-up to the second of two wars in Europe.

Dutt's February 1940 essay was called 'The Empire and the War', and it anticipates in large part the text of this pamphlet put out by the CPGB with the same name a few months later. Given Dutt's important role in the CPGB, it is proper to assume that this Party pamphlet was written by him. The general orientation of this pamphlet is to make the argument that this war in Europe — whatever its reasons — has further damaged the social lives of people in the colonies, as the war-driven inflation has been exported to the colonies and as the protests against these conditions have been stamped out by ruthless force. The CPGB's explanation for the war is cogent: that the inter-capitalist conflict in Europe had become a conflict over territory, particularly the German bourgeoisie's desire to expand their territory (*Lebensraum* or 'living space') across Europe itself (having failed to establish its colonial empire in Africa), that the inter-capitalist conflict had taken on the character of an inter-imperialist conflict, which was drawing in the colonies against the will of the colonial peoples. 'The robbers have fallen out again', writes the CPGB, emphasising the inter-imperialist character of the war.

Such an orientation to the war did not preclude the important role that anti-fascism continued to play in the Communist movement, so that when the USSR entered the war in 1941, Communists in the CPGB such as Dutt did not hesitate to call for the defeat of the Nazis but nonetheless emphasised that the underlying roots of the war were in the inter-imperialist conflict of

that time. The fascists had to be defeated, but the imperialists had to be defeated as well and in time. That was the underlying argument in this pamphlet and in Dutt's *Turning Point for the World* (1941).

What does it mean to republish this pamphlet during another war in Europe? The context of this current war in Ukraine is utterly different, nothing about it a reflection of the long war in Europe (1914-1945). However, there are two themes that linger, namely that Europe's war has a negative social impact on the rest of the world and that Europe and the United States are eager to bring in the rest of the world on their side in a conflict that has little to do with them.

Why is this war in Ukraine so different from the war in the 1940s? It has become a cliché for the United States and its European partners to use the language of anti-fascism to describe their imperialist wars, defining Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Vladimir Putin's Russia as fascist states and the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as the Allies landing on Normandy to save Europe. This is a false argument, but useful for Western propaganda to confuse people about the actual facts of the current imperialist wars. Since the world economic crisis of 2007-08, the United States has found that it cannot outcompete what the US calls its 'near peer rivals' — Russia and China — in places such as Europe. Due to the West's wars against Iraq and Libya and its hybrid war against Iran, Europe lost access to major sources of energy, and became increasingly reliant upon Russian energy sales. Furthermore, as the Western financial system seized up, European states welcomed Chinese investment, and

more than a dozen European countries joined the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative. The US watched as its Atlantic Alliance withered and as a historical integration of Europe and Asia became a reality. Pressure was placed on the two ends of Europe and Asia — in Ukraine and Taiwan — to pose the challenge of China and Russia in military and not commercial terms. That was the heart of the US imposition of a conflict on Asia and Europe. The US imposed a conflict, which then broke out into a war in Ukraine, and which threatens to break out in a conflict in Taiwan. This is neither an inter-imperialist conflict nor a war against fascism, but a set of military and near-military conflicts imposed by the leading imperialist power on the rest of the world.

Most of the countries in the world recognise that this war is not a war against fascism or to save democracy and nor do these see any historic parallels with the long war in Europe. Even close US allies, such as India, are averse to being dragged into this conflict, whether by making rash public statements on the side of the US or by sending arms to Ukraine. They would like this war to come to an end and most see that the main block to this possibility is the United States, which has refused — since March 2022 — to allow Ukraine to continue negotiations with Russia. Nonetheless, the US and its allies have attempted to force the Global South into this war, demanding public statements and delivery of weapons. This is being refused, and instead, the countries of the Global South seek to bring this war to a close. The reason why these countries want this war to end is because of a neo-colonial structure that makes a European war have a catastrophic impact on distant countries due to the very poor food system in the world and due to the financial suffocation of the Global South by the

channels of finance controlled by the West. Since 60% of the world's arable lands are in Africa, why do the African countries continue to be dependent on grain from Ukraine and Russia? The neo-colonial structure prevents these countries from developing their land in a sustainable manner to ensure food sovereignty. Why do unilateral — and therefore illegal — US sanctions against Russia and tens of other countries impact the trade and development agenda of Global South countries? These are not idle questions. They are fundamental to way a war in Europe so dramatically impacts billions of people who have neither anything to do with that war nor are able to force peace in Europe.

A historical pamphlet from June 1940 provides an opportunity to learn something about the long European war from 1914 to 1945, but it also allows us to discuss the current war in Europe. One must not assume that the context in these two conflicts is the same or that the text of a pamphlet from 1940 will tell us about our own time without the necessary hard work of building our own sense of the current conjuncture. So, we read this old text to understand it in its time, and to draw lessons for how to understand our time. That's the work of historical thinking and of political analysis. What unites this long period, however, is the structure of imperialism, which promotes a kind of social decay around the world, reproducing hunger amongst the masses of people and hungering itself for wars, spending trillions on weapons and spending minimal amounts to feed humans and to be stewards of an increasingly stressed out earth system.

THE EMPIRE AND THE WAR

SILENCE IN THE EMPIRE

“**T**he only public peace the nation knows is the peace of public prison. India is a vast prison house.” These words were spoken in 1930, when tens of thousands of Indians were in prison and when the Labour government, on behalf of the ruling class, was keeping order within the Empire with machine guns and police terror.

The subject peoples of the Empire are prisoners within their own lands. And now, with the outbreak of the war, the imperialist bureaucracy is attempting to enforce the silence of the prison house.

We are told that all is well with the Empire and that the people are united behind the Government — but strikers are being shot down in Rhodesia and India; there are food riots and huge strikes against the increased cost of living; workers’ demonstrations are broken up by the police in Trinidad and Cyprus; there are deaths from starvation, clashes with the police and strikes in Jamaica; in Australia, 75 percent of the organised Trade Union movement has declared its opposition to the war.

With a clear voice, and by their actions, the subject people of the Empire are declaring that their demands be met.

We are told that all is well and happy in the Empire — yet the government is forced to suppress the Moyne report² on conditions in the West Indies lest it should give the lie to their hollow pretences. This government, representing the far-flung interests of British finance capital, tells us that a new era of progressive colonial administration is now dawning; and with cringing servility, the Labour leaders congratulate them on this “change of heart.” But the paltry £5 million which they profess to be going to set aside for this purpose at some future date, is far less than is spent on one day of the war. This miserable sop, to be paid out of the pockets of the British taxpayer, is not going to solve the acute problems of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and agrarian crisis that today beset the 480 million people of the Empire.

As the war develops, the misery and starvation of colonial people is increased tenfold. Hundreds of millions of peasants and workers, who even according to official reports, were before the war living below the minimum human standard, have now to face a 30 to 40 per cent rise in the cost of living in order to pay for the war and the profits of war.

In the eyes of the law, it has become a terrible crime to communicate news of what is happening in the colonies. A Jamaican correspondent writes to *Reynolds News* that “a most rigorous censorship bans all mentions of labour strikes in the Press, whether these matters concern the islands or any part of the world.” The Defence of India Act, which invokes the death penalty for certain offences, prohibits the “promotion of class hatred” or

² The Report of the Royal Commission inquiring into the British West Indian labour unrest and uprisings of 1934-1939 that was not fully published until the end of the Second World War in 1945.

the publication of news whether true or false, concerning the “sympathies of His Majesty’s subjects as regards matters relating to the war.”

Trade Union leaders in India, including officials of the All-India T.U.C., hundreds of Communists, Socialists and leading Congress workers have been arrested and thrown into prison for leading the struggle against the new war burdens or for making anti-war speeches. The Defence of India Act is being used, not to defend India against an external enemy, but rather to defend British rule in India against the Indian people themselves; it is being used in the attempt to suppress the rising tide of working-class protest.

As the war develops, the silence of the prison house deepens and we are spoon-fed with the lie that all is well within the empire.

THE PEOPLE OF THE EMPIRE

The poverty of the people inside the Empire is so desperate that it beggars description. Millions of them have never tasted fresh milk or meat. More than 90 per cent of them have to keep body and soul together on 2d. a day. Less than one in ten can read or write. Millions die every year from easily preventable diseases or simply because they are so under-nourished that they no longer have any powers of resistance. It is not uncommon to find them reduced to the level of wild animals, eating the bark or leaves of trees. The smallest luxuries of life — a cup of tea, a pair of shoes, a visit to the cinema — are to vast majority beyond the wildest dreams of possibility. Their lives are a bleak and dreary

round of labour. For them, indebtedness and slavery are the inevitable lot from which only an early death brings release.

In this vast slum of misery, the majority of the people are engaged in agricultural pursuits. The small peasants, who own an acre or two and whose annual crop is sold for a few miserable pounds, have to meet out of their income the demand for high rents, government taxes and innumerable other imposts for the upkeep of swollen police forces and high-salaried bureaucracies. Every year millions of them are driven deeper into debt in their inability to meet those demands and are evicted from their lands to join the ranks of the landless proletariat; if they are lucky, they are absorbed in the capitalist mines and plantations on a wage of a few pennies a day. If they are unlucky, they die of starvation or sell themselves into slavery.

This situation of mass impoverishment and agrarian crisis is the result of the deliberate policy of imperialism. By restricting production and working-class consumption at home, it creates an “unwanted surplus” of colonial products. Instead of selling their crops, the peasantry have to burn them; the price obtained is reduced by half.

The same capitalists who buy up these cheap raw materials sell their manufactured articles to the colonial people at artificially maintained “scarcity prices,” and the cheap goods of rival industrial countries are excluded. On top of these high monopoly prices, heavy import duties are imposed to collect revenue from the impoverished people. In the West Indies, where the people live almost entirely on imported foods, as much as 40 percent of the total revenue of the islands is raised by taxing imports, whilst only five percent is raised from Income Tax. Thus, the main burden

is thrown on to the poorest people who, in return, are given no social services worth the name.

But now that the Empire is at war; the subject people are called together and told they must make further enormous sacrifices in order to preserve “democracy” and “justice.”

The first few months of the war are showing what this means. Prices of crops, which already barely covered the cost of cultivation, are being cut down or fixed at pre-war slump levels by the Government. In the Gold Coast, the Government buys up all the cocoa crop at a price fixed by themselves and permission to export is only granted to “established firms.” In Palestine and Cyprus, fruit crops are rotting for lack of a market. In India, a flat rate has been fixed for sugar-cane and jute prices as paid to the grower, but the market prices of these commodities are rocketing up. In Malaya, in spite of the war demand for tin, the quota for production for the second quarter of 1940 has been reduced and some 20,000 miners thrown out of employment.

But there is no restriction of prices when it is a question of selling the goods of the capitalists to the people. Imported tinned milk and salt fish (the basic diet of the West Indian people) are up by nearly 50 per cent since the outbreak of war. The cost of living in India is up by 40 per cent. The price of a packet of sugar in the Gold Coast is doubled.

What does all this mean in terms of poverty and starvation for the people who inhabit this slum Empire? The growing strike movement, even in the face of tear gas and rifle fire, gives the answer. The subject people, already

living in sub-human conditions, are being crushed down beyond the limit of endurance in an effort to make them pay for the war.

WHOSE EMPIRE, WHOSE WAR?

But take a look at the profits made by those who tell us that the Empire stands for democracy. Lever Brothers and Unilever, Ltd., the huge soap and margarine combine which virtually owns West Africa, pays out a dividend of 15 per cent to its shareholders.

Tate and Lyle, biggest sugar firm in the world and owning huge plantations in the West Indies, have made a profit of £9 million in five years, and, after issuing a 40 per cent “scrip bonus,”³ paid a 13.5 per cent dividend last year.

Apex Oilfields and Trinidad Leaseholds paid dividends of 30 per cent and 45 per cent respectively in 1936/7.

In India, the profit boom of the last war brought dividends of 365 per cent and 250 per cent to the fortunate holders of textile shares. Even in the depth of the world economic crisis, when workers’ wages were slashed, the Textile Mills and Tea Plantations were paying dividends of 30 per cent, 40 per cent and even 50 per cent.

And now, with the second imperialist war, the capitalists are agog at the prospect of a “trade revival” and “renewed gainful activities.” Sir Jeremy Raisman, spokesman of big business in India, rejoices that “the present is

³ An offer of free additional stocks to existing shareholders.

one of the times in which war is productive of certain advantages.” Heavy speculation is reported on the Calcutta Stock Exchange; jute shares leap up; there is a rush to buy mining shares of the Companies operating in the colonies just at the moment when Rhodesian workers are shot down during a strike.

And yet they try to persuade you and me and the colonial people that this is *our* glorious Empire, which must be preserved at all costs in our own interests.

WHAT THE EMPIRE MEANS TO US

The apologists of Imperialism try to throw the responsibility for their deeds upon the British worker by saying that, whether he likes it or not, the worker here depends for his food, for his standard of wages, for his employment and for his very existence, upon the exploitation of the Empire.

But Imperialism cares no more for the welfare of the British worker than it does for that of the colonial producer. The Lancashire and Dundee bosses had no hesitation in throwing thousands of their workers permanently on to the streets in order to employ cheap labour in India and to win larger surplus profits. They spend no sleepless nights trying to bring back prosperity to Lancashire by increasing the purchasing power of the millions of naked people within the Empire.

Imperialism no longer acts as a force for developing trade, expanding industry. Finance capital extracts its super-profits by restricting output and

consumption, by closing, rather than opening, the doors of world trade. And in the present war, with the logic of insanity, it is carrying this process still further. By means of rationing, high prices and one form or another of “saving,” the consumption of the British working class is to be cut to starvation level. We and the colonial people must starve, not because there is a shortage of food, but in order to pay for the war and the profits which monopoly capitalism is making out of the war.

The British people no more own the Empire than the Indians and Africans own the mines upon which they work for a few pence a day. Our livelihood no more depends upon the possession of an Empire than it depends upon the continued existence of those few multi-millionaires who are now seeking to extend their power and wealth.

The wealth of the colonies is used to increase the strength of those great monopoly combines whose very existence is the real threat to our wages and employment; it is used to increase their stranglehold over production, to enable them to artificially fix prices, to restrict output and consumption. These monopolies, drawing their strength from the surplus profits of Empire, are the cause of unemployment, the final absurdity of poverty in the midst of plenty.

This is the system which we are asked to preserve; this is the imperial paradise for which the colonial people are asked to make untold sacrifices — a paradise of bankers, industrialists and speculators. Once again, as in 1914, the subject peoples are drawn into war by those who own the Empire.

THE CAUSE OF WAR

The Bombay workers, when on October 2nd they declared a one-day strike against the war and the Government's repressive measures, had no illusions as to what kind of war it was. The wave of strikes that is now sweeping not only across India but every colony of the Empire, drawing in masses of hitherto unorganised workers, is reiterating that protest against the burdens and sacrifices resulting from the war.

The defeat of German Imperialism in 1918, after four years of bloodshed and incalculable suffering, brought no lightening of the yoke of oppression to the colonial people; every specious promise that had been made to them was broken. And no sooner were the dead buried than the new scramble for colonies and markets appeared in an even intenser form. And at the same time, there was a new complicating factor in the world — the existence of a Socialist State living side by side with the imperialist powers.

The Soviet Union neither desired nor needed to exploit colonial peoples; the liberation of the Tsarist colonies, and the rapid strides in prosperity made by them, created a deep and revolutionary impression upon the subject peoples of the Empire. For this reason, and because of the growing power and prosperity of the Russian people in the period of capitalist decline, the imperialist countries, in spite of their own acute conflicts, were drawn together in hatred of the Soviet Union.

The young and expanding German industry that had been temporarily smashed by the war and the imposition of heavy reparations at Versailles,

was built up again with the support of British capital; Hitler was brought to power, financed and armed with British help; everything was done to encourage German imperialism with the set purpose of using it as the spearpoint of a united onslaught on the Soviet Union.

To serve this end, democracy was betrayed in every corner of the world and reaction was entrenched. But the game failed; German Imperialism, far more powerful and well-armed than in 1914 and forced by the dynamic of its own development to expand or explode, nevertheless refused to face the Red Army.

So, the robbers have fallen out again. In the sharpening crisis of world capitalism, they look with greedy eyes upon one another's property, they itch to lay hold on the huge imperial preserves which are the foundation rock of the big monopolies; the conflicts deepen; someone lets off a pistol; there is a general dive for the booty.

RULE OF TERROR

Our ruling class, whose monied interests spread to every corner of the Empire, are determined to fight on to retain their rights to exploit this Empire.

If the workers in the colonies express their views on the war, their Press must be muzzled and confiscated. If the workers strike against the excessive burdens of taxation and rise in the cost of living, they must be forced back to work with tear gas and rifle shots.

Twenty-one years ago, we had an example of the extent of terror which imperialism is prepared to use against the people. In the town of Amritsar, at a time when demonstrations were being held all over the country to protest against the introduction of repressive legislation, General Dyer decided, in his own words, to “give the people a lesson.” He ordered his troops to fire on a peaceful crowd of 12,000. 380 were killed and more than 1,000 injured, including women and children.

India is not the only place where force is used. Nigerian women were machine-gunned for demonstrating against taxation and high prices. Warships are summoned to deal with strikers in the West Indies. Bombing planes are used to “pacify” the Frontier tribes and the Arab people. Long before Hitler came to power the Indian people knew and feared the concentration camps of British Imperialism.

The rule of terror becomes more pronounced as the contradictions of imperialism sharpen and as the oppressed peoples gather their forces in powerful united movements for national freedom. Whether it be in Germany, in France, in Britain or within the subject Empire, the ruling class, in its relentless drive to maintain the rate of profit, attacks the people with ruthless terror whenever they begin to threaten the foundations of capitalist exploitation.

A NEW PHASE OF STRUGGLE

But 1940 is not 1914. The use of force against the people cannot today beat back the mighty mass movement that is sweeping forward. Twenty-five years ago, the colonial workers were unorganised and without leadership; the peasantry were politically unconscious; the movements for national liberation were undeveloped and led by reformists who were easily corrupted by minor concessions.

Today it is not so. There has developed in each colony, in a lesser or greater degree, a genuine popular movement which for twenty years has been in sharp and continual conflict with imperialism.

Three great waves of mass action have spread across the Empire since the last war. The first, coming immediately after the war and reflecting the world wide revolutionary movement, engulfed India, Ireland, and the Arab countries of Palestine, Iraq and Syria. The second wave came ten years later when imperialism attempted to make the colonial people foot the bill of its economic crisis. Huge strikes in India were followed by a united national struggle which paralysed the administration and called into operation the whole armoury of military repression before "order" was restored. There were big strikes in Kenya, Gambia, Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Rhodesia.

And finally, before the development of the present war, the third wave of unrest develops. In the West Indies, from 1935 onwards, the struggle has matured rapidly. In Malaya and Mauritius, big strikes are on the order of the day.

Thus, on September 3rd, with the outbreak of the war, British Imperialism was already facing a situation of growing discontent throughout large sectors of the Empire. This latest wave of colonial struggle, rising with unmistakable vigour, but as yet only half developed, already reveals the absolutely new character of the present period. The working class in every country has reached a far higher degree of organisation in spite of having to work in conditions of semi-legality or sometimes completely underground; and, because of its greater organisation and its clearer political consciousness, it more and more acts as the driving force and gives a lead to the various national movements.

Moreover, because of their stronger organisation and their resistance to shouldering the economic burdens of the war, the colonial people now begin to occupy the centre of the world stage, not simply as peoples fighting for their national freedom, but as the front-line fighters in the struggle of all the exploited and oppressed to end the capitalist system and to advance towards Socialist peace and prosperity. In this new situation, the Indian people, and in particular the Indian working class, by their united stand against the war, have given a magnificent lead.

For India is the keystone of British Imperialism. Politically, strategically and economically, it is the pivot of the Empire, the foundation rock of a ruling class which is the most reactionary enemy of the international working class and which is now engaged in waging a war to preserve its colonial possessions and for more absolute world domination.

The fact that in India the imperialist system is faced with problems which it is unable to solve, throws upon the Indian people, and particularly upon

the Indian working class, an international responsibility that they are showing themselves fully prepared to accept.

And as the burdens of war increase, the national struggle, not only in India but elsewhere, will grow in intensity, weakening the drive of British Imperialism to world domination and strengthening the fight for a new world freed from exploitation and war. This war which serves to sharpen the existing antagonisms and to increase the existing distress in the colonies, will, with extreme rapidity, draw remote and backward countries into the current of struggle for national emancipation and against the oppressors. All the experiences of twenty-five years are not forgotten; they are stored up for the struggles that lie ahead.

LABOUR IMPERIALISM

For the peoples of the world these events in the colonies are of incalculable significance. What have the Labour Party leaders to say?

Nowhere is their complete betrayal of all Socialist principles more clearly shown than in their refusal to support India's demand for complete and immediate independence and their repudiation of the right of all peoples freely to determine their own futures. It is a far cry today from those days when, as in 1925, the General Council of the T.U.C. could roundly condemn imperialist exploitation and declare the right of all colonial people to complete separation.

For the Labour Party leaders have made it clear that they line themselves up completely behind the Viceroy in refusing India's demand for

immediate independence. Like the Viceroy, they offer in the distant and shadowy future a meaningless fantasy called “Dominion Status” hedged in by vaguely specified conditions, reservations and safeguards. About the actual struggle in India, the mass arrests and the peoples' opposition to the war they say nothing.

For the colonial Empire, these Labour leaders have another “solution” — they speak as though the “colonial question” can be solved by some form of International Commission of Control, perhaps an International Chartered Company to exploit the colonies on a grander scale, perhaps a League of Nations brought back to life to sanctify whatever form of joint imperialist rule the British and French ruling class dream of establishing after the war is over. But of freedom, not a word. All this vague talk about improving the Mandate system, of reforming imperialism or of making the resources of the colonial countries available to all-comers, is purely reactionary and deceptive. So long as the monopoly-capitalist system, based as it is upon the exploitation of the Empire, remains unchallenged, so long no amount of “internationalisation” is going to have any effect other than to strengthen the hold of monopolies, to increase the degree of colonial exploitation and, because of the changing balance of forces within the capitalist countries, lead to fresh conflicts and imperialist wars.

UNITY WITH THE COLONIAL PEOPLE

The people in the colonies themselves are not dumb. They have a voice and, since they know what it is to live under imperialist rule, their voice is one which deserves to be heard. They are

claiming freedom to solve the problems which Britain has proved herself unable to solve for them.

For they have seen — and no power on earth can hide from them — the victorious liberation of the Tsar's colonies. They see that the once backward peoples of Asia have, with the practical aid and encouragement of the Russian Communist Party, stepped suddenly out of the dark ages of feudal and imperialist oppression into the bright light of Socialist prosperity, ever-expanding Socialist industry and undreamt-of advances in cultural life. The old myth of “backwardness” is exploded; the new prospect of rapid advance to prosperity through freedom and Socialism has become a flesh and blood reality to the exploited millions.

These facts are of tremendous importance today when the ruling class, still hoping to develop its attack upon the Soviet Union, has huge armies massed in the Near East.

There can be no freedom for the British people so long as we allow our ruling class to nourish itself upon the life-blood of the colonies. But now the struggle to end monopoly capitalism is on; the fight will grow sharper and more bitter as the war spreads and the burdens increase. We must seize this opportunity to forge links of practical unity with the subject peoples of the Empire and to afford them practical aid in our common fight. To lose this opportunity would be a crime against the working class.

We demand full and immediate independence for India and the right to frame her own constitution through a Constituent Assembly.

We declare the right of all peoples to full self-determination which implies the right of secession, and we repudiate the Labour Party's plan for

international control of colonies which is only a cloak for more intensive imperialist exploitation.

We demand the release of all political prisoners, imprisoned for putting forward the economic, social and political demands of the people.

We demand the withdrawal of all repressive legislation introduced under the guise of defending the Empire from Hitler, and in particular full freedom of the Press, free speech and the right to organisation.

We declare that a war to preserve the system of imperialist exploitation cannot be in the interests of our people or of the people in the colonies. This system has brought misery and virtual slavery to hundreds of millions of people.

At a moment when we are being asked to tighten our own belts, we declare our complete support of the magnificent fight of the colonial working class to resist the lowering of their living standards in order to pay for the war.

We believe that in our struggle to put an end to this system which breeds poverty, unemployment and war, the working class of the world have the strongest and most powerful allies in the oppressed people of the British Empire.

Not An Afterword

On 20th March, 1943, Brigadier General F.E.W. Simpson at the War Office received a ‘most secret’ memo from the India Office in Whitehall. He was asked to delete a particular remark from another ‘most secret note’ — on the Internal Security problem in India — that had been prepared two months before for briefing either the Chief of General Staff or the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the British Armed Forces. That note, not attributed to any particular functionary in either of the two offices, was handed over to Major C.F.O. Breese of the Combined Operations Headquarters by one Mr Garnons-Williams. It was only a proposal but it contained dynamite. It acknowledged in writing that a ‘tacit agreement’ had been reached

‘that for the duration of the war and probably for some time after, India must be considered for purposes of security calculations as -

- (a) *An occupied and hostile country* [Emphasis mine]
- (b) An allied base for offensive and defensive purposes which must be adequately secured.’⁴

This admission, made in the middle of the war and in the wake of the Quit India movement, was inflammable material for the press — both British and Indian. Simpson was asked to treat this characterization with ‘the very highest degree of secrecy.’ Yet the document somehow survived in the

⁴ The National Archives, Kew, WO 106/3757: ‘Internal Security Problem in India’ (Most Secret Note), 15 Jan 1943.

colonial archive — as an unwitting testimony by the imperial government to the fact that ‘[t]he subject peoples of the Empire are prisoners within their own lands’, something that this pamphlet had alleged as early as in June 1940. It was a secret but honest assessment of the colony in wartime: a junior partner dragged into conflict against its will gone rogue, an indispensable strategic asset for prosecuting the war in Asia, and an invaluable resource base to tap into by starving millions and detaining hundreds of thousands of imperial subjects.

This pamphlet, published as part of the erstwhile Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)’s ‘War Library’ series made explicit and public what was implicit and confidential in the official mind of the empire: the war fought in the name of liberal and democratic values in Europe precluded any vision of self-determination for the colonized ‘wretched of the earth’, the inchoate and insincere promises of the Atlantic Charter notwithstanding. All 10000 copies of the pamphlet were tools of public education and open criticism that were circulated braving censorship — presenting a much-required counterpoint to standard imperialist propaganda. Wars continue to be waged today and government propaganda meander through ever more sophisticated avenues of manufacturing public consent for what only brings death and disease, misery and destitution for the vast majority of people. To read this pamphlet now, eight decades after it was first published — we at the Study Circle insist — is to be able to appreciate the courage in challenging received wisdom about any war, when ugly truths about open secrets remain buried deep in the archives.

The text of this pamphlet has been taken from a copy collected from the Marx Memorial Library in London. Shashi Singh has transcribed the whole document for this edition. It has been very lightly edited and a few footnotes have been added for clarification where required. Kadambari has designed the apposite front cover at a very short notice. We have retained the original back cover of the pamphlet unaltered because of its historical value — it lists the nine other texts from the CPGB’s ‘War Library’ series and boasts a rare advertisement of the *Daily Worker*. Vijay Prashad sent his preface from Santiago, Chile in record time: we cannot thank him enough. Ananyo Chakraborty ensured that all the different components came together in time before publication. Other members of the Study Circle and Prof Suchetana Chattopadhyay have extended their unflinching support time and again. To echo an appeal which we made on Red Books Day last year: we are a team of volunteers, nothing encourages us more than your reading of this old text — for all red pamphlets, whether print or digital, are meant to be read, and shared.

Suchintan Das
(On behalf of the Sankrityayan Kosambi Study Circle)

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