



1939: THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE WAR

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For 45 years there has been controversy about the policy of the Communist Party at the beginning of the Second World War. The party started with the policy of 'the fight on two fronts'. This involved supporting the war against Hitler, but simultaneously calling for the removal of Chamberlain and the men of Munich from the government. Five weeks later it declared that the war should be opposed as 'a fight between imperialist powers over profits, colonies and world domination.' Why was the policy changed? And was the change correct?

The Communist Party leadership, of which I was a member for many years, took the view, on each occasion when these questions were raised, that it would be a diversion from more urgent tasks to discuss and decide on them. I now think that this was a mistake, and that the 1939 policy should have been reviewed while the main protagonists were still alive.

Some are, and this book, the record of a conference held by the History Group of the Communist Party in 1979 in which several of them took part, is therefore very much to be welcomed. Many of the contributions make fascinating reading.

Ted Bramley, a member of the Central

Committee and the Political Bureau in 1939, describes the 'bombshell' effect of the Communist International's decision, made known three or four weeks after the outbreak of the war, that it should be opposed. He and other contributors give a number of reasons for the rapid acceptance of that decision. The attitude of the Chamberlain government was already raising doubts about the 'fight on two fronts' line. Because the Soviet party was the only one to have led its people to socialism, and because of the role it and the Comintern had played in the anti-fascist struggle, communists for the most part accepted without question the correctness of the views which came from Moscow.

In addition Marxist education on war was then largely based on Lenin's writings about the imperialist war of 1914-18, and *The Short History of the CPSU (B)*, a sort of bible for communists, which had said in 1938 that 'a second imperialist war has already begun.'

Once the initial shock had worn off, it was not therefore so difficult to accept the change of policy, even though it meant the virtual abandonment of the distinction made between the fascist and bourgeois-democratic powers at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935.

Opinions differ on the role of the Comintern. Dave Priscott, who, as a young worker in Portsmouth opposed the war from the beginning, warns against over-emphasis on its responsibility. I think he is right in saying that if the Comintern had not intervened there would have been continued opposition to the 'fight on two fronts' line in the party. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Ted Bramley is correct when he says that the intervention of the Comintern was decisive.

I am sure that this was the view of Harry Pollitt, with whom I worked closely between 1949 and 1956, when he was general secretary and I was assistant general secretary of the Communist Party. With the support of J R Campbell, Pollitt fought hard in the Central Committee against the Comintern line, saying, as he told me, that they were meeting 'like a lot of rabbits in front of a snake.' But when he failed to convince its members he accepted the majority decision, agreed to his removal from the position of general secretary, and publicly expounded party policy.

He told 800 miners at Trealaw: 'As a man who believes in the Communist Party before anything else in the world, it is my

duty to expound its policy', adding that 'it was a splendid thing for working people to know that the Communist Party was strong enough to depose leaders who disagreed with its policy — if the Labour Party had adopted a similar position we should not be in the position we are today.'

Was the change of line right or wrong? Monty Johnstone, in his excellent opening, concludes that the original policy of the 'fight on two fronts' was correct. Bramley, Idris Cox and most participants take the same view, though the opposite case is forcefully argued by others. Pollitt himself considered after the war that his initial stand was right.

The main argument of those who think otherwise is that the Chamberlain government was not anti-fascist, only objected to Hitler because he threatened Britain's imperialist position, and was aiming to switch the war against the Soviet Union. All this is true. But the question remains: what was the *objective* result of the British government's action in declaring war on Nazi Germany, repeatedly described by the Comintern since 1935 as the main, the worst, the most vicious enemy of the working people?

This action, irrespective of the motives for it or the wishes of the government, placed Britain on the side of the forces opposed to fascism. Of course the Chamberlain government had imperialist aims. So did the Churchill government after the Soviet Union came into the war. Of course Chamberlain wanted to switch the war. But the issue was how to stop him.

In retrospect, I think that the 'fight on two fronts' would have made it more difficult, not easier, for Chamberlain to switch the war against Hitler. Though the Communist Party did much good mass work between 1939 and 1941, and received support as the only party conducting such work during the 'political truce', its position was certainly not in tune with the feelings of the majority of working people, and to that extent there was a degree of isolation. Had the 'fight on two fronts' policy continued, the party could have mobilised much greater mass action against the Chamberlain policy of switching the war.

Of the many lessons to be learnt from the 1939 events, the most important is that each Communist Party should make up its own mind about its policy, paying attention to the views of others, but not treating them as holy writ. Stalin himself said in 1946 that 'the Second World War from the very

onset assumed the nature of an anti-fascist war, a war of liberation . . .', though without directly admitting that he was wrong in 1939. There are no infallible parties and no infallible leaders. We must make our own decisions on the facts and with the abilities available to us.

George Matthews