

Notes on a Marxist history of World War II
By Chris Wright

I happened to come across Chris Bambery's book [*The Second World War: A Marxist History*](#) (2014); it seems pretty good. Should have taken notes on Ernest Mandel's book on the same subject; I'll rectify that mistake with this one. It agrees with Mandel, of course, that the war was largely "a continuation of the 1914–18 conflict—a struggle to re-divide the world between the world's great powers." It acknowledges, though, that for tens of millions of people the war was much more than that.

As you know, the Great Depression led to a harmful protectionism on the part of the great powers. "...The US and France followed Britain in attempting to create their own protected trade areas, together with a degree of state direction of the economy. Germany, Japan and Italy did not control overseas territories and looked to military expansion to secure markets and raw materials. For the German economy this global shift to protectionism was a catastrophe. Britain, France, the US and the USSR all had ample supplies of raw materials within their economic zones [including their colonies]. Germany did not. Nearly half of Britain's trade was with its dominions and colonies and a third of French exports went to its colonies; Germany had none. Germany's economic revival [after World War I] had been based on exports, but now they were excluded from key markets, and key raw materials had to be bought with dollars, sterling or francs... Before Hitler took power, sections of Germany's ruling circles began to argue that its export problems and lack of raw materials could only be solved by domination of Eastern and South Eastern Europe. They found ready allies in the military command."

Interesting: "The idea that the British state was fighting fascism during the Second World War ignores the warm relationship that existed between the fascist dictators and sections of the British ruling class, dating back to October 1922 when Benito Mussolini and his Blackshirts came to power in Italy." Newspapers, politicians (such as Churchill), aristocrats, and businessmen supported Mussolini—as did many in the U.S., including Roosevelt, who called him "that admirable Italian gentleman." Of course, in general the West's ruling class was at least very sympathetic towards fascism before World War II, if not during it. (And the *structure* of Western economies was formally fascist, characterized by deep and extensive ties between big business and the state.) The fascist Oswald Mosley was just a little more extreme and buffoonish than his peers.

Likewise, in the thirties "the dominant view in British ruling circles was that Germany should be encouraged to satisfy its expansionist ambitions to the east"—not least because this would threaten Russian Communism. Bambery gives some detail on how fond rich Brits were of Hitler, for instance some of the royals. Like the Duke of Windsor, formerly King Edward VIII. The dominant view in the ruling class was that Hitler ought to be appeased, although some went further and would have welcomed Britain's inclusion in the Third Reich. Material support was even given Germany. "The City of London continued to provide the German economy with a vital line of credit all the way up to the outbreak of the war. This policy of economic appeasement of Hitler matched Baldwin and Chamberlain's policy of political appeasement."

As for Churchill, "What Churchill grasped early on was that the Führer was aiming at German hegemony in Europe and that that was a direct threat to British imperialism, which had always manoeuvred between the various European powers to stop any one becoming too dominant. Unlike Chamberlain, Churchill was prepared to ally Britain with the US against Germany. The overwhelming message propagated by historians and politicians, on the right and the left, is that

this was a war against fascism and for democracy. But fighting fascism was never the main concern of Churchill. He was opposed to Germany from the mid 1930s onwards because he recognised that it threatened Britain's position in Europe and the world. He had no problem with the Italian fascist dictator, Mussolini." (Had nothing against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia.) This is true, of course, since it's well-known Churchill was a fanatical imperialist (and racist). He even supported Franco in Spain.

One reason Chamberlain and others wanted to appease Hitler is that they knew that if a war broke out, victory would be possible only if the U.S. and the Soviet Union entered it; and the price of that would be to further reduce Britain's position as a world power. Meanwhile Britain built up its armed forces in case of war, hoping it could impose an economic blockade on Germany (as in 1914–18) and France would be able to hold out. In the end, of course, things didn't go as planned, and in return for financial and material assistance from its two major allies it had to acquiesce to the dismantling of its empire, "the very thing Winston Churchill held so dear."

In France, fascism was a force to be reckoned with. But the Popular Front of Republicans, Socialists, and Communists triumphed in May 1936—to the horror of "the comfortable classes," many of whose members now looked to Hitler for salvation. By 1940, much of big business and the leadership of the French military had no heart for a war against Hitler, while the workers and peasants "were sullen in mood and unenthusiastic about a government that they saw as having betrayed the promises of the Popular Front." So the German victory wasn't long in coming.

The U.S., needless to say, "was dismayed by the Japanese invasion of China [in the 1930s]," and increasingly came to see Hitler as a major threat to U.S. power as well. Harry Truman, incidentally, may have been an exception, since as late as June 1941 he was quoted by the press as saying, "If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany and that way let them kill as many as possible." (The cold logic of the imperialist.)

In Germany, as industry collapsed it advocated protectionism less than it traditionally had and came to favor a policy of expanding control of markets and raw materials. Soon, the need for *Lebensraum* (e.g. in Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Romania) "became the rising demand among industrialists, financiers, and the generals." As one historian has said, "The expansionist *Lebensraum* ideology enunciated by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* must have been regarded as manna from heaven by the profit-strapped German business class. That Hitler meant *Lebensraum* in the USSR, i.e., the Ukraine, and not in South Eastern Europe, few noticed." So Hitler began to get more and more support from industrialists and bankers, especially as he wooed them.

...The Nazis and big business shared common aims. Firstly, to use repression to smash working-class organisation and to reverse welfare measures in order to increase exploitation. Beyond that, both looked to expand production, to plunder, geographical expansion and war. Nazi political dominance sat comfortably with the continued economic dominance of big capital. A section of industrialists and bankers, whose mouthpiece was Hjalmar Schacht, moved towards accepting Hitler as chancellor. That month the steel magnate and Nazi Party member Fritz Thyssen, together with Schacht, organised a letter signed by business leaders urging Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as chancellor.

...In the meantime von Papen played on Hindenburg's hatred of the Social Democrats to undermine the president's support for [Chancellor] Schleicher and to urge the old man to appoint a coalition government involving the right-wing parties

and politicians. The president was a Prussian landowner and the agricultural lobby was also pressing for a coalition government of right-wing nationalists and the Nazis. Hitler's confidence was such that in this swirl of negotiations he held out for the chancellorship. Hindenburg dismissed Schleicher and on 30 January 1933 appointed Hitler as chancellor, heading a coalition government in which the Nazis initially took just two cabinet positions. The Nazi accession to power rested on a pact between the Nazis, leading sections of big business and the German high command. This bloc would remain in place until the end.

Unsurprising tidbits on the Spanish civil war: Texaco and Standard Oil supplied over three million tons of oil to Franco on credit, while Ford, Studebaker, and General Motors gave him 12,000 trucks, three times more than the Axis powers did. The chemical firm Dupont sent 40,000 bombs via Germany to avoid contravening the U.S. Neutrality Act. Much of Britain's ruling class supported Franco, but the country confined itself to just giving no aid to the Republican forces and pressuring the French to do the same. A Tory member of Parliament remarked that "the propertied classes in this country [Britain] with their insane pro-Franco business have placed us in a very dangerous position." Indeed, for the Spanish war emboldened Hitler.

After Neville Chamberlain became prime minister he appointed the pro-fascist Sir Neville Henderson as ambassador to Germany. This guy's views—and the views of a large segment of the Western ruling class—are encapsulated in his statement, "I would view with dismay another defeat of Germany, which would merely serve the purposes of inferior races."

In 1938, France and, especially, Britain were not terribly keen to defend Czechoslovakia from Hitler, in part because that would put them in an alliance with Russia, which pledged military help to Czechoslovakia. Nor did it help that Czechoslovakia was alone in Eastern Europe in being a democratic state with a strong and vibrant left and labor movement. That did nothing to endear it to capitalist powers.

Even after Germany invaded Poland, Britain and France did effectively nothing for seven months, during the "Phony War." There weren't even air attacks against Germany, since the British air minister was loath to bomb armaments plants or other locations on the grounds that they were private property! Instead the RAF dropped propaganda leaflets. Bambery argues that much of the reluctance to fight Germany was due to the fear that an anti-fascist war might unleash left-wing popular unrest across Europe. After all, the ruling class was still haunted by the memory of the revolutionary wave that had broken out in Europe at the close of World War I. (And by more recent shocks, like the 1926 General Strike in Britain, the 1936 strike wave in France, and the 1936 revolution in Spain.)

Anyway, France fell—Bambery has fun describing the incompetence and lack-of-commitment-to-the-war-effort of the British and French early on—and the fascist regime of Vichy was founded. According to one historian, it was "largely a reaction against the revolution that the Popular Front had represented in the eyes of much of the French bourgeoisie." Pétain implemented anti-Semitic and fascist measures without orders from Berlin, and voluntarily collaborated with the Nazis.

Meanwhile, the British government was far from unified. Churchill, a few colleagues, and the Labor party were fully committed to fighting Hitler, but the Conservative appeasers (Lord Halifax, Chamberlain, and others) were working behind the scenes to negotiate with Hitler. Frankly, there was some treason going on. Most of the Conservative party was against Churchill. And its attitude had some rational basis, for the Battle of Britain was progressively radicalizing

the populace. As Bambery says, “There was a radical spirit of resistance in that summer of 1940, but in the absence of any radical force to give conscious expression to it, that spirit would fuel the growing desire for a Labour government pledged to construct a welfare state”—which, of course, came to pass immediately after the war.

America, ever the selfless, noble nation, gave Britain no free help. An American journalist summed it up in December 1940:

In heaven’s high name, how have we aided England? When? Whose sacrifice produced the aid?... We have sold England an indeterminate number of military airplanes. She has paid cash. She has come and got them. We have sold England, I understand, some old rifles and various shipments of ammunition. She paid cash. She came and got them... Finally, in a moment of benign generosity, we traded England some rotting destroyers for some air and naval bases so valuable to our defence that even Mr Churchill had difficulty justifying the deal to his Parliament. We are going to sell her more and more planes, if our factories will just decide to produce them fast enough. We are going to sell England practically anything she wants—if we don’t want it first... And Napoleon called England a nation of shopkeepers!

Britain soon went bankrupt, but even then we found a way to fleece it of more money: without notifying London, we sent a warship to South Africa in late 1940 to take 50 million pounds of gold, Britain’s last tangible assets.

Lend-Lease was passed in early 1941, but we attached onerous conditions to that too: Britain was barred from exporting to new markets or existing markets such as Argentina. And a year later it had to pledge that the Sterling Bloc (a protective trade zone) would be dissolved after the war.

It can seem as though Hitler might have easily won the war but for a few mistakes he made, such as invading Russia before knocking out Britain. Bambery makes a good point, though: “In simple economic terms the outcome of the Second World War should not have been in doubt. In 1936–38 a third of the world’s industrial production took place in the US. Add in the USSR’s and Britain’s shares and the figure was over half. Together the Axis powers’ share was 17 per cent. In 1941 and 1942 the UK was out-producing Germany in military materiel. By 1942 the US alone was exceeding the combined output of all the Axis states. The Allies controlled 90 per cent of the world’s oil output, with the US producing two-thirds of the world’s oil in 1943; the Axis states controlled just 3 per cent.” Had Hitler conquered Russia and Britain early on (which certainly wasn’t out of the question), the calculus would have changed. But it’s hard to believe he could have defeated the U.S., or, eventually, an alliance of the U.S. with most of the world. And he still would have had to pacify Russia, which wouldn’t exactly have been easy.

On top of all this, there’s no way Nazism could have kept control over all the territories it conquered. It was just too brutal. It wouldn’t have had the resources to *constantly* be smashing resistance movements *everywhere*. —In short, the Third Reich was doomed, by its very nature, not to last long. It simply wasn’t sustainable, especially on an international scale. Thank god!

One thing I didn’t fully appreciate before was just how incredibly incompetent Stalin was. Practically the only thing he did right was to sometimes let his subordinates do what they wanted. His earlier purge of the military leadership was, of course, disastrous and monumentally stupid, but even during the war he repeatedly made costly and idiotic mistakes. Not the least of which was

to *blindly trust that Hitler wouldn't invade* (Hitler wouldn't break his promise to me!), despite information from intelligence agencies. He did zilch to prepare for the invasion, except to ship huge amounts of resources to the Nazis as per their 1939 pact. In fact, from the late 1920s through the 1940s, Stalin's career is virtually a record of mistakes and disasters—mistaken foreign policy, mistaken military policies, mistaken paranoia, mistaken judgments of people, etc. What a guy.

The chapter on the popular Resistance in Europe is interesting. Predictably, the Allies were deeply ambivalent towards it, at times even hoping the Germans would defeat the partisans (and indirectly assisting them in doing so!). Why? Because the partisans were left-wing, and you can't have that sort of thing. But the successes—and the heroism—of the Resistance in certain countries were remarkable. For instance, one could say, perhaps, that Italy has had two eras of genuine glory: the Renaissance, and the Resistance. 1943–45. It was far more effective than the French Resistance, liberating large swathes of the country on its own. There is nothing comparably heroic in American history.

Here's a historian's comment on the political situation in France:

Early in 1941, the prefect of the Lot [department] noted that collaboration [with the Nazis] was supported by the bourgeoisie, the peasants showed no open hostility, and the workers were against it. In December of the same year, the prefect of the Limoges region reported: 'Very striking hostility to the [Vichy] government from most workers, small farmers, small shopkeepers and artisans; unreserved support from big business and big shopkeepers, magistrates and notables.'

The usual story: patriotism and bravery from the lower classes, treason and cowardice from the upper.

"The United States had a number of aims in the Second World War. They included the dismantling of the British and French trade blocs, achieving a permanent military presence in Europe, and control of Middle East oil. But there was another—hegemony over China. Washington championed an 'open door' to China, meaning it wanted free trade which would benefit the sale of American goods and the purchase of raw materials from China. To that end Washington opposed the ceding of Chinese territory to the European powers (such as Britain's control of Hong Kong) and more importantly Japanese attempts to control the country." In the end, of course, it wasn't the Japanese but the Communists who foiled America's hopes for an open door in China.

We're taught that one of the unspeakable crimes of the Soviet Union was its imposition of famines in the Ukraine and elsewhere during the 1930s. We're not taught that Churchill and Britain were guilty of the same thing. British-controlled India had seen many man-made famines; one of the worst was in Bengal in 1943:

Between 3.5 and 5 million people died from starvation, malnutrition and related illnesses during the Bengal famine of 1943. The famine was not a natural catastrophe, it was man-made. The British were stockpiling food for the Indian army and rice was exported to the Middle East to feed British soldiers and to Sri Lanka where the British-run South East Asia Command was based. The loss of Burma cut rice supplies from there while a 'scorched earth' policy was implemented in the region nearest the Burmese border.

Overall there was no fall in the rice harvest in 1943, but the rural labourers, peasants and fishing families of Bengal had seen their incomes fall by two thirds since 1940 while the price of rice had soared. Bengal had enough rice and other grains to feed its population, yet millions of people were too poor to buy it. The British authorities failed to implement normal peacetime famine relief measures and were more concerned with quelling the Quit India movement [a rebellion against British rule]. The Bengal government failed to prevent rice exports, and made little attempt to import surpluses from elsewhere in India, or to buy up stocks from speculators to redistribute to the hungry. Starving people flocked into Calcutta, many dying in a city with well-stocked markets. The British authorities removed (at times forcibly) tens of thousands of destitute, starving people from Calcutta and other urban areas in late 1943. These people were relocated to die in the countryside. Churchill repeatedly opposed food for India and specifically intervened to block provision of 10,000 tons of grain offered by Canada, because he saw that as weakening British rule. The US declined to provide food aid in deference to the British government. The British government rejected the Viceroy Lord Wavell's request for 1 million tons of grain in 1944 and also rejected his request that the US and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) be approached for assistance.

Churchill: what a guy.

So what was the overall meaning of the war? "Ernest Mandel argued that 'the Second World War was in reality a combination of five different wars'. He lists the wars as first, 'an inter-imperialist war' fought between the Axis and Allied powers; second, 'a just war of self-defence by the people of China, an oppressed semi-colonial country, against Japanese imperialism'; third, 'a just war of national defence of the Soviet Union, a workers' state, against an imperialist power'; fourthly, 'a just war of national liberation of the oppressed colonial peoples of Africa and Asia...launched by the masses against British and French imperialism, sometimes against Japanese imperialism, and sometimes against both in succession, one after the other'. Mandel's fifth and last war was 'a war of liberation by the oppressed workers, peasants, and urban petty bourgeoisie against the German Nazi imperialists and their stooges', which was fought 'more especially in two countries, Yugoslavia and Greece, to a great extent in Poland, and incipiently in France and Italy'." A perceptive interpretation. Different facets of the war had different meanings.

But "the imperialist nature of the war shaped everything. Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin succeeded in containing the forces of the anti-fascist resistance in Europe. In Asia they were only able to keep the lid on it for a brief time before it boiled over again [with the postwar decolonization movements]."