

The left and Max Shachtman

Two distinct currents emerged after 1940 from the Trotskyism of Trotsky. One was the "official", "orthodox" Trotskyism of James P Cannon, E Mandel, Michel Pablo, Gerry Healy, Ted Grant, etc. The other was mainly associated with the name of Max Shachtman. (The British SWP is a hybrid, owing more to the former than the latter). The Shachtman current mutated into a number of tendencies — Shachtman himself ended his days as a sort of American Fabian — but its history remains a matter of great importance for those engaged in the work of renewing Trotskyism in the post Stalinist world. Ernest Haberkern* examines *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the 'American Century'* by Peter Drucker. (Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1994 £14.95). The second part will appear in our November issue.

BIOGRAPHIES are hard to do well.

On the one hand, like a novelist, you are telling a story. There is a beginning, a middle and an end. You have to get the reader interested in the drama.

On the other hand, unfortunately, real lives, unlike fictional ones, aren't usually well-plotted. There are subplots that just fizzle out; loose ends that are never wound up; and odd twists and turns that don't seem consistent with what led up to them. And a biography, unlike a work of fiction, is also a reference work. The reader expects, and has a right to expect, that the important details are all there and are accurately reported. Accuracy in the details is as vital in a biography as it is in a dictionary or a telephone book.

In the first task, this biography succeeds. The book is a good read. The reader's attention is caught and held by the intrinsic interest of this history. It is the history of the resistance of a section of the American left during World War II and the early Cold War — the period when the foundations of the modern security state were laid and the American Republic



The horrible realities of Stalinism — queuing to survive.

radically transformed in order to defend "the Free World." First from the threat of Nazism and then from the threat of Stalinism. Peter Drucker's portrait of this band of American dissidents is as dramatic and compelling as the subject itself.

It is the author's failure to measure up to the second task that undermines the book. Details are wrong or out of focus. Difficulties and contradictions are glossed over. If the story seems to hang together, it is also a little glib. It seems to hang together just because the details have been slighted. The reader is left with the uneasy feeling that while the experience has, like the carnival, been enjoyable, not all the acts were what they seemed to be.

Max Shachtman's private property?

THE TITLE of the book itself is a distortion. Neither the Workers' Party (WP) nor the Independent Socialist League (ISL) could be rightly called "Max Shachtman's Left." No political tendency on the American left, and few internationally, were as free of, as hostile to, the politics of the leadership cult as the Third Camp tendency. In America you would have to go back to the pre-World War I Socialist Party to find an equivalent in this respect.

The "cult of personality" became, especially after Trotsky's death, a characteristic trait of all the other groups that claimed his legacy. Norman Thomas, to take an example from the opposite wing of the American anti-Stalinist left, never felt bound by the decisions or debates of his movement. He was Mr Socialism and, as its Presidential-Candidate-For-Life, determined what the party's real position was. This was not a personal failing. It should not be taken as any special criticism of Thomas whose positive role in the '30s, '40s and '50s has been underestimated in my opinion. The concept of the socialist sect as the emanation of its leader was all-pervasive. You didn't have to make any effort to fall into this pattern; you just had to do what came naturally in the era of fascism and Stalinism.

The WP and the ISL never referred to themselves as "Shachtmanites." That was an insult, a belittling term of contempt, used by their opponents. And this insistence on democratic procedure, on a refusal to grant any

member privileged status was inextricably tied to the tendency's politics. It followed directly from their rethinking of the tradition of the Comintern and the Trotskyist movement that derived from it. And no one was clearer or wrote and spoke more eloquently on this question than Shachtman.

Drucker, following the regrettable practice of academic historians, never makes explicit his own political hostility to the politics of the Third Camp and especially its rejection of the ersatz "Leninism" of the Third International.¹ It may even be that in describing this tendency as "Shachtman's Left" he doesn't understand how wrong he is. It is probable that he is incapable of conceiving of an organisation that is democratic and revolutionary. At one point he pretty much says that as long as the "Shachtmanites" were revolutionary, they were "Leninists" and when they stopped being "Leninists" they stopped being revolutionaries.² In reality, the rejection of ersatz "Leninism" was part of the tendency's politics from the beginning. I do not think this is conscious falsification by Drucker. I think he is genuinely confused. As confused as Trotsky was on this point.

This excuse will not suffice to explain the other main distortion in Drucker's presentation. In describing the political tendency that defined itself by its adherence to the political position of the Third Camp as "Max Shachtman's Left" Peter Drucker glosses over the fact that the major decisions and theoretical documents of the tendency were not only not authored by Shachtman but were opposed by him. Some he later accepted with more or less grace. Others he simply ignored.

In his conclusion, to take the most serious example of this obfuscation, Drucker refers, somewhat offhandedly, to the theory of bureaucratic collectivism which "Shachtman developed in 1940 and 1941" as "only one highlight" illustrating the original contributions he made to Marxist theory and politics in the early 1940s.³

Now, in fact, the theory of "bureaucratic collectivism" and the Third Camp politics that lay behind it are the main reasons why anyone is at all interested in this particular branch of the American Trotskyist movement. They are

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also the main reasons why people are interested in Max Shachtman. The Workers' Party, the Independent Socialist League and the Independent Socialist Clubs of the 1960s were never large organisations and where they exercised serious influence on larger and more influential movements — in the trade unions, especially the UAW, in the 1940s; in the civil rights and peace movements in the 1950s; and in the New Left of the 1960s — it was because of their distinctive political ideas on the nature of socialism and the practical political conclusions those ideas led to. Certainly, this tendency's intellectual influence, which was considerable, stemmed from its critique of the Soviet Union. In both respects it continued the tradition of Leon Trotsky more successfully than that of other tendencies that claimed his mantle.

To take the most prominent example: Drucker and other historians rightly recognise the role played by the Workers' Party in the trade unions during World War II as its most significant practical achievement. This small group filled the vacuum created when every other political tendency on the left abandoned the fight not only for trade union rights but for democratic rights in general. No, abandoned is the wrong word. The left during the war meant the Communist Party and its supporters. They were the drill sergeants who disciplined the troops in the assault against those "subversives" whose whingeing threatened the war effort.⁴

Even the majority Trotskyists who began with more trade union influence were sidelined. In part, this was a result of government persecution but it was also a function of their politics. If, as the "orthodox Trotskyists" of the Socialist Workers' Party believed, the future of socialism was at stake when the Nazi invaders threatened the collectivised property won by the October Revolution, how could they vigorously pursue the class struggle against the Soviet Union's most important military ally? They could do it in theory but not in practice.

The theory of bureaucratic collectivism was not one contribution of the Third Camp tendency, it was the theoretical basis of the politics that defined that tendency. And Max Shachtman spent most of his political life attacking that position; first from a pro-Soviet point of view similar to that of Trotsky's and then from a pro-west, anti-communist point of view. The man who was responsible for the theory was, as Drucker's own research documents, Joseph Carter.

There are all kinds of secondary and personal reasons why Carter's contribution has been denigrated and Shachtman's inflated. There usually are when you are dealing with real life rather than fiction. For one thing, Carter was a serious thinker who as far as one can tell suffered from a writer's block and had very little charisma. Max Shachtman, on the other hand, was a prolific and facile writer and by all accounts (I never met him myself) had far more charisma than was good for him.

More important was the fact that Shachtman was already a person of some standing in the Trotskyist movement. His book on the Moscow trials, which is still worth reading today, was not just a sectarian pamphlet of no interest to those outside a charmed circle.

The left, and the American intelligentsia in the 1930s was on the left, followed the debate over the trials with passionate concern. That Shachtman was chosen to write this major public account said something about his importance in the movement; as did the fact that in the first debate over "The Russian Question" it was Shachtman who wrote the brief for the Trotskyist majority against the dissidents like Yvan Craipeau, James Burnham and Joseph Carter.

When, in 1940, Carter first proposed the heretical notion that Stalinism was a new class society neither capitalist nor socialist his supporters, people like Hal Draper and Emanuel Geltman, were young, new recruits. Valued comrades, of course, but not on the same level as Shachtman. George Novack, a supporter of the Fourth International who spoke as a critic of Shachtman, was not too far off the mark when he wrote in his introduction to the 1973 edition of Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism*⁵ that the theoreticians of bureaucratic collectivism had, in 1940, "captured" Max Shachtman.

The fact that Shachtman could be challenged on this question, that a heated debate could take place on the issue, and that the organisation could eventually overturn Shachtman's position without the debate degenerating into the abusive brawl and split that were typical of the Trotskyist movement, is itself a symptom of how radical the break had been with the past practice of the Comintern.

The truth is that the "theoreticians of bureaucratic collectivism" didn't quite capture Shachtman. Drucker's treatment of this episode is very confusing. It deserves quoting in full as an example of how the author's plausible story falls apart under scrutiny.

Shachtman's conclusions, laid out in the December 1940 *New Internationalist*, were that the Soviet Union was not a workers' state — there could be no workers' state without workers' political power. It was not capitalist. It has a new bureaucratic ruling class that had to be overthrown in order to create workers' democracy or move to socialism. Even though every vestige of working-class political power had disappeared in the USSR, the collectivised property created by the revolution survived. Shachtman therefore called the USSR "bureaucratic collectivist": the economy and the state were the collective property of the bureaucracy. Though bureaucratic mismanagement undermined this new form of property, it was showing its superiority for economic and human progress over the anarchy of capitalism. It enabled Shachtman to characterise the USSR as a transitional society, a peculiar product of the epoch in which the world was moving from capitalism to socialism. Marxists therefore had to defend it against any attempt to restore private property.

While the book under review is liberally peppered with footnotes, this crucial semi-quote is not referenced. It couldn't be. It doesn't exist. It is an amalgam of two different and opposed statements. But, to be fair, this isn't entirely Drucker's fault.

What happened was this. In December of 1940, Shachtman wrote an article attacking Carter's position because Carter argued that

the working class had nothing to defend in the collectivised property of the Soviet Union. As long as the working class was deprived of all power in the state, and even of such means of self-defence as the independent trade unions it had been able to build in capitalist societies, collectivised property was for the working class simply an instrument of its exploitation.

Shachtman did not in this article use the term bureaucratic collectivism. He called the new system bureaucratic state socialism. This was not an exercise in sectarian hair-splitting. Shachtman used a different term because he was openly defending a different position. However, he soon began to adopt the new coinage without reservation. As Carter pointed out this only concealed the fact that Shachtman was defending as much of Trotsky's old theory as could be defended. Trotsky's old slogan "defend the workers' state" became "defend historically progressive collectivised property."

Twenty years later, in 1962, Shachtman printed a collection of his articles. The first article was titled "Is Russia a Workers' State?" It purported to be a reprint of his 1940 article. But it was a bowdlerisation of that article. The term "bureaucratic collectivism" replaced "bureaucratic state socialism" and the passage extolling the historical achievement of collectivised property even under bureaucratic mismanagement was excised. By 1962 Shachtman was already far along the way to becoming just another "socialist" defender of American foreign policy. He certainly wasn't about to emphasise his earlier views. (Although I know of no passage where he repudiated his defence of the historically progressive role of collectivised property.) He couldn't reprint Carter's articles not only because they weren't his but because he no longer agreed with their hostility to capitalist imperialism.

In his book, Shachtman stole Carter's term and buried his politics. Doesn't Drucker realise what happened? The passage above amalgamates the 1940 article with its bowdlerised 1962 reprint. Drucker must have read both. Didn't he see the contradiction? In his mock quote, the term bureaucratic collectivism and the defence of collectivised property appear together. That combination doesn't occur in either of Shachtman's versions.

There are other examples of serious confusion.

"Defeatism" and "Defencism"

THROUGHOUT the debate over "the defence of the workers' state" from 1937 up to 1949 when Shachtman finally abandoned his position — while still refusing to vote for Carter's alternative — the ghost of Lenin's anti-war polemics of 1914-1916 lurked in the corridors. In 1951 Shachtman summoned up this ghost in order to defend his turn toward the right. Drucker makes a muddle of this whole episode.

Shachtman began with a modest proposal to support "a labor government" even if it "should not yet be a socialist government." Since the Labour Party was at the time in power in Britain and militarily aiding the corrupt and brutal dictatorship of Syngman Rhee

in Korea as part of the United Nations (read American imperialist) force, Shachtman was proposing to abandon the Third Camp position in favour of support to the imperialist camp led by America. Everyone who recognised this immediately and according to Hal Draper, who was present, everyone was shocked. Draper said out loud what the rest were thinking. He added language which confined support to a government "which takes over the nation and defends the interest of the working people on the basis of a genuinely democratic course in foreign and domestic policy which is not in fact subordinated to the interests of capitalism and imperialism."

What does Drucker make of this discussion? He claims Shachtman began by proposing to "support in war any government that adopted a democratic foreign policy." But this is exactly the condition Shachtman didn't make! Draper proposed it in opposition to his motion and Shachtman voted against it. Drucker concludes there wasn't much difference between Draper and Shachtman. That is certainly true in Drucker's book because he has eliminated the difference!

Now this is not a debate over a trivial or irrelevant issue. Today the overwhelming majority of the left, prominent veterans of the movement against the Vietnam War, are urging NATO (i.e. US) intervention in Haiti and Bosnia using essentially Shachtman's 1951 arguments. What was involved in this debate was the basic anti-imperialist position of the socialist movement. Drucker not only misrepresents the facts. He doesn't appear to be cognisant of what the debate is about.

Shachtman was not a man to take defeat lying down. He counter-attacked in an article entitled "Socialism and War." In this article Shachtman argued that the old World War I position no longer held. To "wish defeat" as Lenin had in that war where both sides were equal evils made sense. In a struggle between Stalinist Russia and capitalist democracy it didn't.

In a four part article Draper outlined what Lenin's slogan had meant in World War I, why it was mistaken then, and why it was leading Shachtman astray in 1951. How does Drucker deal with this material?

Draper tried to clarify the issues at stake with a series of articles on "revolutionary defeatism", the old principle that communists should fight against war and capitalism even by means (e.g. strikes in vital industries) that might risk their own country's defeat. Draper suggested that the idea of "defeatism" had always been confusing and that Shachtman was turning its ambiguities upside down in a way that undermined opposition to US wars. The idea was controversial when Lenin first put it forward during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Trotsky and Luxemburg opposed it during the First World War on the grounds that socialists should prefer the war to end without victory or defeat for any of the capitalist powers.⁸

Now Drucker is under no obligation to agree with Hal Draper's historical account. On the contrary, he has an obligation to consider with a jaundiced eye all the participants in a heated debate. But, there is also an obligation on the part of the historian to make

clear what the parties are saying. And this Drucker doesn't do. His account slanders not only Hal Draper but Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. And he doesn't do justice to Lenin or Shachtman either. Fortunately, Humanities Press will shortly be publishing Draper's series of articles in book form so I need only give a short account here.

What Draper demonstrates is that Lenin initially meant by "defeatism" support for the other side in the war. That is what it mean in 1904 when Lenin and other leading figures of the Second International (not all) openly supported the Japanese as a "progressive" force against "reactionary" Czarism. At the start of World War I, Lenin, in a rage over the betrayal of the patriotic socialists, called for the defeat of Czarism. It sounded about as "hard" as you could get. Unfortunately, as both friends and enemies were quick to point out, the worst of the German socialists were saying the same thing. They thought the defeat of the Russian Czar was a blow for freedom too. Lenin responded by qualifying the term out of existence until he finally dropped it in 1916. The version of the "defeat" slogan Drucker describes as the old communist position was neither. It was the weakest of Lenin's reformulations of the "old position of the communist movement" that Lenin had just invented and that was his and his alone.

Shachtman, of course, was interested in reviving this confused slogan in its original version. Lenin's original "lesser evil" slogan

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seemed to justify Shachtman's move towards the defence of democracy. Which was only the mirror image of his defence of collectivised property in 1940.

Trotsky in 1916 pointed out exactly what was wrong with Lenin's slogan. The pity is that a self-confessed adherent of the Fourth International should slander Trotsky, whose position was the clearest in 1914-1917. When Lenin charged Trotsky, in the heat of the battle, with defending the "neither victory nor defeat" slogan, it was a low blow. Drucker does not have Lenin's excuse. The slogan "neither victory nor defeat" was raised by pacifists and Mensheviks. Trotsky and Luxemburg both opposed it. "Neither victory nor defeat" meant return to the status quo. Neither side should benefit. It meant in practice, as Trotsky argued eloquently, appeasing the great powers in the interests of peace. It was the exact analogue of Chamberlain's appeasement policy in 1938 or "peaceful coexistence" in the 1950s and 1960s. Trotsky was not for appeasing either imperialist camp; neither was he for the victory of either imperialist camp; he was for the victory of the working class over both.

Drucker concludes by accusing Draper and

Shachtman's other opponents of basically agreeing with Shachtman. "Everything Shachtman said about not helping the other side to victory was 'absolutely correct', Draper said, and 'should have held good in 1914...'"⁹

What should have held good in 1914? Drucker doesn't explain this truncated quote. The implication is that Draper like Shachtman was for backing away from Lenin's "hard" anti-war stand. In fact, Draper, like Luxemburg and Trotsky, rejected the choice of supporting either side in an imperialist war.

That was where Lenin's slogan led even if Lenin didn't want to follow the thought out to its conclusion. Indeed, Lenin tended to blow up when his opponents accused him of meaning by "defeatism" support for the rival imperialist power even though that was what it had meant in 1904. Shachtman by this time did want to move in that direction. Revolutionary socialists, however, were for strikes, demonstrations, what have you, in 1951 as in 1914, not because they were for the victory of the other side but because they were for the victory of the working class.

Lenin was honestly confused. Shachtman, as his subsequent career indicated, was not confused. He was looking for "revolutionary" arguments to support his own government.¹⁰ In 1951 his evolution was just beginning. People were right to give an old comrade the benefit of the doubt. Why not call a spade a spade in 1994? Why amalgamate the anti-imperialist Draper with the social-patriotic Shachtman?

● The second part of this review will deal with the respective attitudes of Shachtman, the "bureaucratic-collectivists" and the Trotskyists to the Stalinist movement; Drucker's account of Shachtman's drift to the right in his later years; and Drucker's interpretation of socialism and the choices faced by Shachtman and his contemporaries. ■

Notes

1. It would be a digression here to describe in any detail the origin and meaning of "ersatz Leninism." I would only point out here the irony of it all. This "Leninism", which Lenin never heard of and which had nothing to do with his political career or thought, was invented by G. Zinoviev for the specific purpose of dishing Trotsky. Since Trotsky had never understood what Lenin was trying to do organisationally, he could only throw up his hands, admit that Lenin had been right on this point while he had been mistaken, and pass on to his own followers Zinoviev's proto-Stalinist ideas on party organisation.

2. Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, Humanities Press, New Jersey (1994), p.272. (Hereafter shortened to MSAHL.) Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*

3. *Ibid.*, p.316

4. It is to the eternal shame of the American historical profession that no one, left or right, has written up this story. The imprisonment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps, the witch-hunting of even the mildest dissent, the vicious race campaign that softened up the American people to the point that they could blandly accept the mass murder of civilian populations in Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki — to name a few — all remain confined to monographs. And the complicity of the left is almost unmentioned. It is as if "de-Nazification" in Germany had been confined to a couple of small books on one or two incidents published by small presses.

5. Leon Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Pathfinder Press, New York (1973)

6. MSAHL, p.132

7. Hal Draper, letter to Peter Drucker of July 10, 1989

8. MSAHL, p.248

9. *Ibid.*

10. MSAHL, p.155