

Who's the Imperialist? American Marxists Respond to the Russo-Finnish War
By Nathan Moore

On November 30, 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland. As Stalin would later remark, the Soviet Union hoped to annex portions of Finland near Leningrad, a city the Soviet Union viewed as vulnerably close to foreign territory.¹ For a regime that ostensibly decried imperial conquest, the invasion of Finland, together with the annexation of the eastern half of Poland and the Baltic states in the previous months, might appear to be hypocritical. Indeed, the day after the invasion, an editorial in the *New York Times* read, "The vociferous champion of 'peace' has wantonly invaded Finland by land, by sea and by air. The arch foe of 'capitalist imperialism,' after annexing nearly half of Poland and imposing its will and garrisons on three helpless neighbors, seizes by force the territory it covets from the first country to resist."²

That non-communists throughout the world would criticize these Soviet actions is not surprising. Scholars have noted that the response to the Soviet invasion was particularly passionate in the United States, as Travis Beal Jacobs argues in *America and the Winter War, 1939-1940*. While the United States government remained officially neutral, American groups organized vibrant public campaigns to aid Finland, and American newspapers berated Soviet conduct. Many of those who participated in these campaigns and wrote about the war were already anti-communist and wary of the Soviet Union.³

However, American Marxists generally viewed the Soviet Union favorably. The question thus arises: how did American Marxists respond to the Russo-Finnish war, which apparently violated one of the core tenets of their ideology? Did they criticize Stalin and the Soviet Union or did they try to justify the invasion? In this essay, I will strive to answer these questions, focusing

¹ Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2005), 145.

² "Workers of the World," *New York Times*, December 1, 1939.

³ Travis Beal Jacobs, *America and the Winter War, 1939-1940* (New York: Garland, 1981), 71-72.

in particular on the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and the American Trotskyist movement, headed by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). While both of these organizations were small, they are worth studying not only to better understand why American Marxism was so marginalized but yet so feared, but also to better comprehend a movement that attained almost mythological, hyperbolic status in American society. Indeed, the fear of Marxism in the United States far exceeded the number of Marxists. An understanding of Marxism as homogenous accompanied this hyperbole, but as will be shown, the ideological diversity within Marxism was great.

Historians have not extensively chronicled the response within American Marxist movements to the Russo-Finnish War. Travis Beal Jacob's study of the Russo-Finnish war focuses predominantly on the American mainstream's reaction to the Soviet invasion, devoting little space to American Marxists. While mentioning the CPUSA, he does not explain its intellectual justifications and criticisms of the Soviet Union. No indication is made of American Trotskyists' response.⁴ Likewise, Peter Kivisto, a noted scholar on Finnish-Americans, deals with American Marxists and the Russo-Finnish war only briefly in his essay titled "Finnish Americans and the Homeland, 1918-1958." He examines how Finnish-American communists were torn between ideology and nationality, as well as how differences over Soviet foreign policy emerged within the CPUSA after the invasion, but this discussion is limited to two paragraphs of the essay.⁵ Thus, much of the literature on the American response to the Soviet invasion deals with American Marxists only peripherally and does not examine the discourse among Marxists in any detail.

⁴ Jacobs, *America and the Winter War*, 75.

⁵ Peter Kivisto, "Finnish Americans and the Homeland, 1918-1958," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 16-17.

However, a number of monographs documenting the history of various left-wing movements within the United States can be helpful. Alan Ward's *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* traces the American Trotskyist movement. Central to his book is the discussion of various schisms that emerged within the movement over ideological matters. One such split occurred in 1940, following heated discussion over the nature of the Soviet state and whether it should be supported in its 1939 foreign policy decisions including the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the annexation of Poland, and the invasion of Finland. Two opposing camps emerged: one supporting the Soviet Union, the other criticizing it.⁶

Similarly, scholarship on the Communist Party of the United States notes tension within the party in reaction to Soviet policies. In *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, Fraser M. Ottanelli details the challenges the CPUSA faced following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Previously, the CPUSA had been adamantly anti-fascist. Ottanelli notes that later Soviet actions, including the invasion of Finland, contributed to debates within the party about the legitimacy of the Soviet Union itself. Ultimately, the CPUSA decided to drop their anti-fascist rhetoric and support the foreign policy decisions of the Soviet government.⁷ Harvey Klehr's *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* also notes the challenges the CPUSA faced as a result of Soviet foreign policy decisions. Starting in August of 1939 with the signing of the pact and continuing through 1940 after the invasions of Poland and Finland, the CPUSA lost members and allies, as many on the American left were

⁶ Alan M. Ward, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 188.

⁷ Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 197.

“appalled” by Soviet actions.⁸ However, in both the literature on the CPUSA and the Trotskyist movement, discussion of the invasion of Finland itself is limited.

This literature leaves questions. Scholars treat the invasion of Finland as part of a larger and quite divisive discussion about Soviet foreign policy in 1939. But how did the Russo-Finnish war influence this discussion? A scholarly hole thus exists, and the question set forth at the beginning of this paper remains. As noted above, few have written on exactly how American Marxists responded to the invasion of Finland, the language they used, and the justifications or criticisms they offered. In order to address this question, I will analyze primary sources such as party newspapers, pamphlets, and the letters of prominent American Marxists. Furthermore, scholarship has treated the reaction of American Trotskyists and American Communists as separate spheres of debate. Instead, I will try to find commonalities between the responses of Trotskyists and Communists.

This paper will treat American Marxists’ reaction to the invasion of Finland not as two separate debates, one within the Trotskyist movement and one within the CPUSA, but rather as one larger debate. I will argue that, as American Marxists debated the Soviet Union’s role in regards to the invasion, three positions regarding the nature of the Soviet Union were solidified. These positions were not created by the invasion of Finland; they in fact mirror divisions over the nature of the Soviet Union that had racked American Marxism for the previous decade. However, the debate questioned the definition and manifestation of imperialism and therefore reinforced previous divisions. For some, the Soviet Union itself became an imperialistic nation; for others, the Finnish government and Western capitalist nations, including the United States and the United Kingdom, were to blame.

⁸ Harvey Khelr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 403.

To understand American Marxists' response to the Russo-Finnish war, it is necessary to begin the story in 1919, the year of the Communist Party of the United States' founding. As Khelr, Haynes, and Anderson argue, actions in the Soviet Union dictated the direction of the CPUSA throughout its existence. By 1921, the CPUSA had joined the Comintern and was taking its orders from the Soviet government.⁹ However, various factions splintered from the CPUSA during the 1920s. These splits mirrored events in Stalin's Soviet Union, including the expulsion of Leon Trotsky. In 1928, the American Communist party expelled sympathizers with Trotsky, and the Moscow trials of the mid to late 1930s solidified the split between the American anti-Stalinist faction and the Communist Party.¹⁰ Thus, by 1939, a major division marked American Marxism. To one side stood the pro-Stalinist Communist Party, under the leadership of Earl Browder, and on the other stood the anti-Stalinist left, represented by the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its most prominent members such as James Cannon, Max Shachtman, and James Burnham.

Understanding the ideological positions of the CPUSA and the SWP vis-à-vis the Soviet Union is vital to understanding each party's reaction to the invasion of Finland. The CPUSA's position was rather simple: support the Soviet Union and Stalin. The CPUSA applauded the Soviet Union's progress towards communism under Stalin. Throughout the tumultuous years of Stalin's reign, the CPUSA remained committed to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Soviet bureaucracy, and Stalin. As William Foster, a leading member of the CPUSA, wrote, "By forty years of revolutionary work [Stalin] has demonstrated that he is the greatest living Marxian leader."¹¹ To Foster and others, Stalin and the rest of the Soviet government was the government

⁹ Harvey Khelr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

¹⁰ Ward, *The New York Intellectuals*, 128.

¹¹ William Foster, *Your Questions Answered* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1939), 95.

of the proletariat, a model for those hoping to bring communism to the rest of the world. In fact, the connection between the CPUSA and the Soviet government was close enough for Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson to argue in *The Soviet World of American Communism* that the CPUSA “looked to their Soviet counterparts for advice on how to conduct their own party business.”¹²

American Trotskyists saw the Soviet Union in different terms, criticizing Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy in particular. During his exile from the Soviet Union, Trotsky had argued that the Stalinist bureaucracy no longer represented the aims of its proletarian base; as he described, the Soviet Union was “a degenerated workers’ state under the dictatorship of the bureaucracy.”¹³ The nationalized economy of the Soviet Union secured its place as a socialist workers’ state, but within this state, the workers had no real political influence. Rather, the Stalinist bureaucracy, designated “a caste” by Trotsky, had usurped political control.¹⁴ Trotskyists thus sought to preserve the economic system of the Soviet Union while overthrowing its political leadership. However, by the late 1930s, questions emerged within the American Trotskyist movement over whether or not the Soviet Union could still be considered a “degenerated workers’ state” and, subsequently, whether Trotskyists should still lend it their support. In 1937, some prominent American Trotskyists, including James Burnham, Max Geltman, and Joseph Friedman, suggested that Trotsky’s theory was flawed and argued “that the Soviet Union was neither a workers’ state nor a capitalist state.”¹⁵ Stalinist bureaucracy, they believed, had changed the class nature of the Soviet Union.

¹² Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism*, 4.

¹³ Leon Trotsky, “The Workers’ State, Thermidor and Bonapartism,” *New Internationalist* 2, no. 4 (July 1935), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/02/ws-therm-bon.htm> (accessed November 4, 2011).

¹⁴ Ward, *The New York Intellectuals*, 180.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 181.

Open dissent within the SWP in 1937 was short-lived. To preserve party unity, Burnham, Friedman, and the other Trotskyist skeptics retreated from their position at a party convention in December.¹⁶ However, questions remained about the nature of the Soviet state. Soviet conduct in the late summer and fall of 1939 again raised what had become known as “the Russian question.” On August 23, 1939, the Soviet Union, previously a staunch opponent of fascism and sponsor of anti-fascist popular fronts worldwide, signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. A few weeks later, per a secret agreement within the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Stalin ordered the occupation of the eastern portion of Poland. Burnham and other dissident Trotskyists were appalled at the Soviet Union’s sudden alliance and coordinated military action with a fascist state. Crisis engulfed the American Trotskyist movement as party members debated whether or not to support the Soviet Union’s most recent policy shift. Max Shachtman, a founder of the SWP who had begun to identify with Burnham’s theory of the Soviet Union, described the Pact as “an aggressive military alliance,” in which the Soviet Union had “subordinated” itself to Germany and German imperialist aims.¹⁷ Shachtman also argued that the invasion of Poland constituted “active support” for Hitler and should therefore be opposed by Marxists.¹⁸ The Soviet Union, he argued, had become an agent of Nazi Germany.

In sharp contrast, James Cannon, the National Secretary of the Socialist Workers’ Party, along with the majority of the SWP, claimed the pact between Germany and the Soviet Union was inconsequential. Cannon argued that since the Pact had not resulted in “some fundamental change in Soviet economy” Trotskyists should not concern themselves with the fact that the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Max Shachtman, “The Soviet Union and the World War,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 3 (April 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1940/04/ussrwar.htm> (accessed October 14, 2011).

¹⁸ Ibid.

Soviet Union was now allied with a fascist state rather than “bourgeois democratic” states.¹⁹ As Trotsky had, Cannon believed that the nature of property relations was the only factor that merited consideration when debating support for the Soviet Union. The invasion of Poland little influenced this view. Cannon wrote that the invasion was “simply one of the consequences of the war and the alliance with Hitler’s Germany.” He went on to criticize the measures take by Stalin in Poland, but emphasized that the SWP should still support the Soviet Union.²⁰ Thus, many Trotskyists were ambivalent towards Soviet actions, convinced that Stalin’s decisions were mistaken, but that the Soviet Union as a whole should still be supported and defended.

CPUSA leadership, however, remained united despite the change of course in Soviet policy. The Pact certainly shocked for the CPUSA. Following the Comintern’s anti-fascist, Popular Front policy of the mid-1930s, the CPUSA had advocated international alliance between the West and the Soviet Union and domestic cooperation with center-left parties such as the American Democratic Party.²¹ Ottanelli writes, “peace and resistance to fascist aggression” served as “the center of the strategy of the Communist movement.”²² Nevertheless, however startled American Communists may have been at the abrupt shift in Soviet policy, the CPUSA faithfully followed the lead of the Soviet government and the Comintern. The CPUSA leadership acquiesced to Soviet demands, and its anti-fascist rhetoric ceased.²³ Likewise, following the invasion of Poland, the CPUSA leadership remained in lockstep with the Soviet government, believing its foreign policy changes were necessary to defend its existence as a workers’ state.²⁴

¹⁹ James Cannon, “Speech on the Russian Question,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 1 (February 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1939/ussr.htm> (accessed October 13, 2011).

²⁰ Cannon, “Speech on the Russian Question.”

²¹ Khelr, Haynes, and Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism*, 71.

²² Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, 160.

²³ *Ibid*, 197.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

Thus, by November 1939, American Marxism had devolved into a tripartite debate, and leading American Marxists drifted towards one of these three positions.

On November 30, after months of futile attempts to gain territorial concessions around Leningrad from Finland, the Soviet Union invaded in Finland. As noted earlier, Stalin ostensibly hoped to safeguard Leningrad, which lay close to the Finnish border. Jacobs notes that the invasion was particularly aggressive. The Red Army advanced into Finland, while the Soviet air force bombed Helsinki. In many cases, the bombing did not target military establishments; hundreds of civilians may have been killed in the opening bombardment. Some contemporaries described the attack as “the most brutal bit of warfare yet perpetrated.”²⁵ However, despite the initial brutality of the campaign, Finland’s military, under Commander-in-chief Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, was not immediately defeated. Soon, the invasion transformed into a drawn out war that lasted for over four months. By the time the Moscow Peace Treaty was signed on March 21, 1940, giving small pieces of Finnish territory to the Soviet Union, 25,000 Finnish troops had been killed.²⁶ Soviet loses were five times as high.

More so than the Soviet foreign policy shifts of August and September, the invasion of Finland incensed Americans. Peter Kivisto notes that the majority of Americans saw Finland “as a David fighting a Goliath.”²⁷ Indeed, the New York Times article quoted earlier mocked the Soviet claim that the invasion of Finland was necessary “to protect a nation of 180,000,000 from the ‘threat’ of a nation of 4,000,000.”²⁸ Americans also supported Finland because “it was a country that paid its debts.”²⁹ Regardless of from where they derived their sympathy, Americans

²⁵ Jacobs, *America and the Winter War*, 64.

²⁶ Kivisto, “Finnish Americans and the Homeland, 1918-1958,” 17.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

²⁸ “Workers of the World.”

²⁹ Anthony F. Upton, *Finland in Crisis, 1940-41: A Study in Small-Power Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 32.

across the political spectrum backed Finland. Jacobs argues that American conservatives provided the most boisterous condemnation of invasion. Republican politicians, including former President Herbert Hoover, called for material support for the Finnish army and the cessation of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.³⁰ However, many left-leaning Americans were equally enraged and echoed the conservatives' criticism. For example, both *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, liberal political magazines that "had held a friendly view" of the Soviet Union, decried Soviet bellicosity, particularly the bombing of civilians.³¹ To them, the Soviet Union was no longer acting in the interests of the oppressed; it had become the oppressor.

Many Americans were not only angry, but were also driven to action. As Jacobs writes, "the Russian invasion prompted Americans to see how they could assist beleaguered Finland."³² While the United States government officially remained neutral, conservative politicians lent their support to numerous organizations such as the Finnish Relief Fund and For Finland, Inc.³³ The American Red Cross, various newspapers, and thousands of Finnish-Americans also raised money for war relief.³⁴ Furthermore, as a January 10, 1940, *New York Times* article reveals, some Americans volunteered to fight with the Finnish military.³⁵

In this context of brutal invasion, grueling war, and public indignation, American Marxists debated the legitimacy of Soviet aggression against Finland. The existence of continuities between this debate and the debates over the nature of the Soviet state, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the invasion of Poland are undeniable. The Russo-Finnish war did not result in any substantive ideological shifts. The three major positions on the Soviet Union

³⁰ Jacobs, *America and the Winter War*, 70.

³¹ Jacobs, *America and the Winter War*, 74.

³² *Ibid*, 78.

³³ Kivisto, "Finnish Americans and the Homeland, 1918-1958," 14.

³⁴ Jacobs, *America and the Winter War*, 78-83.

³⁵ "5 Young Americans to Fly for Finns," *New York Times*, January 11, 1940.

remained. However, what is particularly interesting is how American Marxists defended these positions.

In his study of the Communist Party of the US in World War II, Maurice Isserman writes that with the invasion of Finland, “Stalin dropped one more unpleasant task in the laps of American Communists.”³⁶ American Communist leadership had already committed to the Soviet Union; they would not break from Stalin over the invasion. In fact, Isserman states that “Soviet demands on Finland appeared eminently reasonable to the Communists.”³⁷ After all, they argued, Leningrad, “being only twenty miles away from the Finnish border, could easily be bombarded by sea or by land.”³⁸ They believed Stalin’s official explanation that the Soviet Union was simply acting in self-defense.

However, the public outcry generated by the invasion made such a position difficult to defend. It was not enough to say that Finland alone posed a serious threat to Soviet Union. Relying on Lenin’s characterization of imperialism, American Communists instead described Finland as an instrument through which capitalist nations hoped to ultimately defeat socialism in the Soviet Union. In 1917, Vladimir Lenin had published his treatise *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in which he critiqued imperial expansion as a necessary outgrowth of capitalist societies. He wrote that imperialism had an “economic essence;” it was, in his words, “capitalism in transition, or, more precisely, as moribund capitalism.”³⁹ Imperialism, Lenin believed, could stave off, at least temporarily, the triumph of the proletariat that Marx had predicted. By looking outside its borders for markets and resources, a state could prevent the

³⁶ Maurice Isserman. *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 53.

³⁷ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 54.

³⁸ Israel Amter, *The Truth About Finland* (New York: New York State Committee, Communist Party, 1939), 4.

³⁹ Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” in *Essential Works of Lenin: “What Is to Be Done? and Other Writings*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 268.

collapse of capitalism and preserve the wealth of the bourgeois. These economic necessities, Lenin believed, would lead to political action, such as “the striving for annexation...the violation of national independence.”⁴⁰ Adopting this language, American Communists began to paint the Soviet Union as a potential victim of capitalist expansion.

In order to portray the Soviet Union as a victim, the Communists’ initial response to the invasion of Finland reversed the role of invader. On December 1, the day after the invasion, the headlines of the CPUSA’s daily newspaper, *Daily Worker*, read, “Red Army Hurls Back Invading Finnish Troops.”⁴¹ For American Communists, if Finland perpetrated the war, the forceful Soviet response must have been justified. American Communists further emphasized that Finland was a conduit through which foreign powers could invade, and in fact had invaded, the Soviet Union. A pamphlet from the New York State Committee of the Communist Party reminded readers that during the First World War German armies had passed through Finland to attack the Soviet Union. Also, in the civil war that had followed the Bolshevik Revolution, foreign supporters of the White Army funneled soldiers and supplies through Finland.⁴² The CPUSA portrayed the 1939 war as a defensive measure to prevent further foreign intervention in the Soviet Union.

The party did, after all, subscribe to Lenin’s assertion that capitalism and territorial expansion were linked. As William Foster wrote, “Imperialism is a manifestation of capitalism.”⁴³ For Communists, Western capitalist countries therefore posed a substantial threat to the Soviet Union; expansion into the Soviet Union would not only guarantee resources and markets, but would also undermine socialism, the antithesis of capitalist supremacy. Once one

⁴⁰ Ibid, 264.

⁴¹ “Red Army Hurls Back Invading Finnish Troops,” *Daily Worker*, December 1, 1939.

⁴² New York State Committee, Communist Party, *The Truth About Finland and the Wall Street War Drive* (New York: New York State Committee, Communist Party, 1939), 1.

⁴³ Foster, *Your Questions Answered*, 96.

believed that capitalist nations such as Great Britain, France, and the United States had the motivation for expansion into the Soviet Union both for economic advantage and to undermine socialism, it was not difficult to argue that Finland could serve as a means for such expansion. Indeed, American Communists emphasized with ease the close connection between Finland and Western capitalist nations. For example, Earl Browder, the General Secretary of the CPUSA, alerted readers to the shipment of armaments from Great Britain and France to Finland, declaring such actions “preparations for war against the Soviet Union.” And, ultimately, Browder continued, “The Finnish Government, London’s puppet, was pushed into an open provocation and threat of military action against Leningrad... a provocation based on long preparations to transform Finland into a steel dagger at the throat of the Soviet Union.”⁴⁴ In Browder’s and other CPUSA leaders’ estimations, Finland became a pawn in a larger imperialist plot to annex territory and undermine socialism in the Soviet Union. For the CPUSA, this justified war against Finland because, as Georgi Dimitroff, General Secretary of the Comintern, wrote in a pamphlet printed by the CPUSA, it would “eliminate the hotbed of war at [the Soviet Union’s] very frontier.”⁴⁵ Thus, according to leading American Communists and many of their rank-and-file followers, the invasion of Finland was in essence an exercise in counter-imperialism.

Interestingly, the CPUSA implicated the United States, together with the United Kingdom and France, as one of the imperialist powers threatening the Soviet Union. As noted earlier, the CPUSA had provided support for President Roosevelt’s government and many of his New Deal policies. Ottanelli points out that, even after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, CPUSA leadership was reluctant to attack Roosevelt, in spite of pressure from the Comintern. However, following the arrest of Earl Browder on October 23, the CPUSA’s tone on Roosevelt changed, and he

⁴⁴ Earl Browder, *The People Against War Makers* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1940), 7.

⁴⁵ Georgi Dimitroff, *The Struggle Against the Imperialist War* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1940), 15.

became increasingly subject to stinging attacks from the CPUSA labeling him “an agent of big business in defense of British imperialism.”⁴⁶ After Roosevelt’s “disapproval” of the Soviet invasion of Finland, criticism of the president increased,⁴⁷ and, in many Communists’ minds, the United States became firmly entrenched as a imperialist power. Furthermore, as the titles of numerous pamphlets, including *The Truth about Finland and the Wall Street War Drive* and *I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier for Wall Street*, indicate, the CPUSA regarded American capitalists as warmongers desperate to preserve their profits and continue the oppression of workers. In the CPUSA lexicon, they joined “the British War Office” as “the Big Boss” provoking “little Finland” into war.⁴⁸ In ostensibly allying himself with Wall Street on the issue of Finland, Roosevelt had committed the United States to preserving “the European bourgeoisie,” crushing “revolution in Europe,” and extending American power abroad.⁴⁹ These facts, the CPUSA argued, justified the inclusion of the United States in the ranks of imperialist powers set on destroying the Soviet Union.

The CPUSA also argued that the invasion of Finland, in addition to protecting the Soviet Union from aggressive expansion, would help to defeat the Finnish bourgeois and end imperialistic oppression of the Finnish proletariat. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a leading member of the CPUSA, wrote, “Our sympathy is with the Finnish people in their struggle against the Mannerheim government, and for friendly relations with their neighbor, the Soviet government.”⁵⁰ Communists painted Mannerheim as a symbol of bourgeois oppression, an agent of foreign imperialists that stifled any progress towards proletarian revolution. Furthermore,

⁴⁶ Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, 191-192.

⁴⁷ Khelr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 396-397.

⁴⁸ New York State Committee, Communist Party, *The Truth About Finland and the Wall Street War Drive*, 2.

⁴⁹ Browder, *The People Against War-Makers*, 10.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier for Wall Street* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1940), 8.

many in the CPUSA claimed that Soviet intervention in neighboring countries actually enhanced the independence of those states.⁵¹ To Flynn and others in the CPUSA, independence implied not necessarily the absence of foreign intervention, but rather freedom from the control of capitalist powers. In a convoluted manner, the Soviet Union's annexation of territory could therefore be considered anti-imperialist rather than imperialist. Just as capitalism would bring imperialism and oppression, socialism would bring independence. Thus, many American Communists concluded that Soviet action in Finland was not imperialistic. William Foster wrote, "The phrase 'Red Imperialism' is, therefore, a contradiction in terms, a characteristic anti-Soviet slander."⁵² Rather, the CPUSA argued that the war in Finland was necessary to counter imperial expansion and liberate an oppressed people. The Soviet Union was opposing British, French, and American imperialism, conducted through their Finnish agent, the Mannerheim government.

Among American Trotskyists, James Cannon and the majority of the Socialist Workers Party (hereafter called Cannonites or the SWP Majority) followed the lead of Leon Trotsky, adopting a much more nuanced opinion of the invasion, as they had following the Pact and the invasion of Poland. Key to understanding this reaction is the Trotskyist belief that the Soviet Union had a binary nature. As noted earlier, Trotskyists argued that the Soviet Union was composed of a nation of workers organized in a nationalized economy and a Stalinist bureaucratic "caste" that was unaccountable to the Soviet population and sought to protect its own interests. Thus, the SWP Majority could criticize Stalin's actions, but maintain support for the Soviet Union as a whole.

This allowed Cannonites to promulgate what might appear to be a contradictory position on the Soviet invasion of Finland, a position laid out in a February 1940 *New International*

⁵¹ Amter, *The Truth About Finland*, 5.

⁵² Foster, *Your Questions Answered*, 97.

editorial. On the one hand, they decried “the stupidity of Moscow” for engaging in a war that “supplies ammunition to the imperialists and all their lackeys for a new campaign to overthrow the Soviet Union and restore private property.”⁵³ Cannonites, as did the CPUSA, viewed Finland as a staunch ally of capitalist imperialists; Stalin’s invasion of Finland therefore risked retaliation from Great Britain, France, and the United States. At the same time, they believed that Marxists had an obligation to support the Soviet Union. As Cannon had stated in an October 1939 speech, because the Soviet Union retained “nationalized property and planned economy,” it remained “a workers’ state” worthy of “unconditional defense.”⁵⁴ Thus, although Stalin may have mistakenly instigated the Russo-Finnish war, Cannon and many other American Trotskyists cheered a Soviet victory.

To support this dualist argument, the SWP Majority put forth a different narrative than that of the CPUSA. Cannonites criticized the CPUSA for its unwavering support for Stalin, including the suggestion that Finland had attacked the Soviet Union. They argued that it was “necessary for the class-conscious militant to draw back a bit from the tendentious headlines of the Stalinist and capitalist press alike in order cool-headedly to analyze exactly what has been happening in Finland.”⁵⁵ After such “cool-headed” analysis, the Cannonites readily admitted that Stalin had ordered the invasion. The following narrative, explaining Stalin’s culpability, appeared in the SWP editorial on Finland. Stalin, fearing a future conflict with Germany, believed Soviet military bases in the Baltic states and in Finland were necessary to the defense of his regime from an invasion by Germany or another Western power. However, Stalin did not

⁵³ Socialist Workers Party, “An Editorial on Finland,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 1 (February 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/swp-wpsplit/swpwp02.htm> (accessed October 13, 2011).

⁵⁴ Cannon, “Speech on the Russian Question.”

⁵⁵ Socialist Workers Party, “An Editorial on Finland.”

succeed in acquiring Finnish bases diplomatically and consequently adopted military means.⁵⁶ As noted above, Cannon and others described Stalin's actions at the onset of the war as "stupid." To justify this label, they claimed that Stalin had acted against the interests of international socialism. Cannon wrote, "We don't support Stalin's invasion only because he doesn't come for revolutionary purposes."⁵⁷ Rather, as noted above, Stalin ordered the attack on Finland to protect himself and his bureaucracy from foreign powers.

For Cannon, Stalin had become an agent of imperialism. By pulling the Soviet Union into war in Finland, Stalin was essentially doing the bidding of imperialist powers, both democratic and fascist. First, Stalin's actions might divide the proletariat. Cannon wrote in a letter to a fellow Trotskyist that Stalin "had done everything possible to alienate the sentiment of the masses and to serve the game of the democratic imperialist masters."⁵⁸ The SWP's "Editorial on Finland" further clarified this argument, stating that the bourgeois, imperialist West could use the invasion of Finland to criticize the Soviet Union. It read, "But more deliberate and more pernicious than this conscious reaction of the bourgeoisie is the attempt to make out the U.S.S.R. as an 'imperialist' state in the eyes of the working class and to blur the distinction between the soviet forms and the capitalist forms of the ownership of property."⁵⁹ A divided working class would spell the defeat of international socialism and victory for capitalism.

Second, as Stalin's blundering foreign policy had pitted the Soviet Union against both its democratic and fascist rivals, the possibility of foreign intervention in the Soviet Union increased. In fact, Cannonites believed that the Western imperialists applauded the invasion of Finland because it drew the Soviet Union into their "imperialist war," "laying the basis for

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cannon, "Speech on the Russian Question."

⁵⁸ James Cannon, "A Letter to Farrell Dobbs," in *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 120.

⁵⁹ Socialist Workers Party, "An Editorial on Finland."

intervention” in the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ This danger allowed Cannonites to construct the Russo-Finnish war as a struggle between the Soviet Union and democratic imperialists, justifying their declaration that “defense of the Soviet Union” was paramount. Like the CPUSA, the SWP Majority emphasized that Finland, a country that appeared to pose no significant threat to the Soviet Union, garnered the support of imperialist forces bent on destroying socialism. In a SWP statement titled “Resolution on Russia,” Cannonites listed the imperialist forces menacing the Soviet Union—President Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, Great Britain, and the League of Nations—each of whom had condemned Soviet action. The statement claimed that the West’s vigorous denunciation of the invasion might lead “to a direct and full-fledged war against the Soviet Union.”⁶¹ Thus, as the CPUSA had, Cannon portrayed the Soviet Union as threatened by the combined force of Western capitalism, eager to see the disintegration of the workers’ state. It is clear that the SWP majority viewed imperialism as a phenomenon of capitalism. While Stalin had roused this imperialist threat, it remained the duty of Marxists to defend the workers’ state.

Yet, Cannonites did see potential benefits to Stalin’s error. In his speech on the “Russian question,” Cannon argued that “the best defense” of the Soviet Union was “the international revolution of the proletariat.”⁶² As the revolution in the Soviet Union demonstrated, the transformation of property relations served as part of this international revolution, private ownership would be abolished and replaced with a nationalized economy. Cannonites recognized that the Soviet offensive in Finland might result in “the positive gain of the expropriation of private property.”⁶³ Furthermore, as the CPUSA had argued, Stalin’s invasion would free the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Socialist Workers Party, “Resolution on Russia: A Statement of Policy by the Political Committee of the Socialist Workers Party,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 1 (February 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol06/no01/editorial.htm> (accessed October 13, 2011).

⁶² Cannon, “Speech on the Russian Question.”

⁶³ Socialist Workers Party, “An Editorial on Finland.”

Finnish proletariat from “the bourgeois swine who rule Finland” and “the white terror of Mannerheim.”⁶⁴ Ward has pointed out that this analysis is similar to Marx’s analysis of Napoleon. Although Napoleon overturned core tenets of the French Revolution, his conquest of Europe sped the disintegration of feudalism and the establishment of bourgeois rule. By advancing Europe to a higher historical stage, Marx reasoned that Napoleon’s wars had been progressive and had edged Europe closer to socialism. Although, like Napoleon, Stalin was “counterrevolutionary,” he could destroy the existing economic system in Finland and perhaps further the revolution.⁶⁵ Thus, the invasion of Finland, in the estimations of Cannonites, might obliterate bourgeois control in and weaken imperialist control of Finland, allowing for the establishment of socialism.

Max Shachtman labeled such a response “contradictory and untenable.” He lamented, “They condemn the invasion, but support the invaders!”⁶⁶ Shachtman, James Burnham, and a dissident faction of American Trotskyists (Shachtmanites or the SWP Minority) chastised the Soviet Union. The root of their criticism lay in “the Russian question”: should support for the Soviet Union be determined by its class structure? Shachtman and Burnham answered resoundingly in the negative. Shachtman wrote in an open letter to Trotsky, “It is impossible to deduce directly our policy towards a specific war from an abstract characterization of the class character of the state involved in the war, more particularly, from the property forms prevailing in that state.” Rather, he argued, “Our policy must flow from a concrete examination of the character of the war in relation to the interests of the international socialist revolution.”⁶⁷ On this

⁶⁴ Cannon, “Speech on the Russian Question.”

⁶⁵ Ward, *The New York Intellectuals*, 188.

⁶⁶ Shachtman, “The Soviet Union and the World War.”

⁶⁷ Max Shachtman, “The Crisis in the American Party,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 2 (March 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1940/03/crisis.htm> (accessed October 12, 2011).

basis, Shachtman, Burnham, and their allies concluded that the war in Finland could not be defended.

The SWP Minority argued that defense of the invasion of Finland elevated the interests of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist bureaucracy above the interests of the international socialist movement. Shachtman lamented that Soviet victory in Finland would not bring about a Finnish nationalized economy, but rather a counterrevolutionary economy system that served the interests of Stalin. He wrote, “the Stalinist bureaucracy is capable only of strangling revolutions, not making them or giving an impulsion to them.”⁶⁸ Thus, the SWP Minority rejected the argument that the invasion would abolish private property ownership in Finland. Shachtman also declared that the invasion of Finland would “drive the proletariat and peasantry into the arms of imperialist patriotism.”⁶⁹ Burnham echoed this sentiment as he wrote that the Soviet invasion left Finnish workers with two choices: “to fight desperately for the bourgeois ‘fatherland’” or to surrender to Stalin and “a new type of slavery,” Soviet imperialism.⁷⁰ The labeling of the Soviet invasion as explicitly imperialistic represents a sharp break with both CPUSA and Cannonite use of the term imperialist that has been documented above. The Shachtmanites no longer reserved the term for capitalist nations; the Soviet Union, they claimed, had become imperialistic.

An analysis of the relationship between Stalin’s bureaucracy and the Soviet Union as a whole was central to this claim. As noted above, Shachtman, Burnham, and the rest of the SWP Minority questioned the Soviet Union’s proletarian nature. The Stalinist bureaucracy did not, according to Shachtman, exist solely as a counterrevolutionary political entity on top of a socialist economic base, as Trotsky’s “dual nature” theory suggested. Rather, Soviet political

⁶⁸ Shachtman, “The Crisis in the American Party.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ James Burnham, “The Politics of Desperation,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 3 (April 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1940/01/poldes.htm> (accessed October 12, 2011).

leadership had “constantly undermine[d] the social-economic basis of the Russian Revolution.”⁷¹ In essence, Stalin’s bureaucracy had consumed the Soviet Union; Stalin had become the Soviet Union. And therefore, Shachtman concluded that “it is not the nationalized economy that goes to war...Nor does the working class make these decisions—either directly or indirectly—for it is gagged and fettered and straitjacketed. The decisions and direction of the war are entirely in the hands of the bureaucracy.”⁷² Soviet action could not be redeemed on the basis of its class structure, which was economically eroding and had no say in political decisions. It was thus impossible to distinguish between a Stalinist bureaucracy and a nationalized economy, supporting the latter in the war but not the former, as Cannonites had.

Having made this claim, Shachtman could determine whether a unitary Soviet Union, in which the decision-making Stalinist bureaucracy had subsumed the workers’ state, was culpable of imperialism, and thus whether the Soviet Union as a whole merited support in the war against Finland. Shachtman did not believe that the Soviet Union was always imperialist. Rather, it could become imperialist based on the type of war it waged. He differentiated between two types of wars: “reactionary” and “progressive.” If conducting a “progressive” war, or one waged in “the interests of the international socialist revolution,” the Soviet Union would be, as both the CPUSA and Cannonites argued, opposing imperialism. However, if the Soviet Union engaged in a “reactionary” war, one contrary to the wellbeing of worldwide socialism, the Soviet Union would become imperialistic.⁷³ Indeed, following the Stalinist usurpation of power, such a war was possible. Shachtman wrote that Stalin’s bureaucracy had “degenerated to the point where it was not only capable of conducting reactionary wars against the proletariat...but did in fact

⁷¹ Shachtman, “The Crisis in the American Party.”

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Max Shachtman, “Is Russia a Workers’ State?”, *New Internationalist* 6, no. 10 (December 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1940/12/russia.htm> (accessed October 12, 2011).

conduct such wars.”⁷⁴ The invasion of Finland belonged in this category. In a March 1940 essay, SWP Minority argued that “the present war”, in which the Soviet Union had engaged by invading Poland and Finland, “is a new struggle among the great powers for a re-division of the earth.”⁷⁵ It was, in other words, a war among imperialists. Thus, the Soviet Union’s participation in the war made it, although a non-capitalist country, “an integral part of one of the imperialist camps” and antagonistic to true socialism.⁷⁶

On its face, this argument appears to contradict Lenin’s claim that capitalism generated imperialism. However, the SWP Minority did not find its conclusion in conflict with Marxist-Leninist theory. Rather, Shachtman argued that Lenin had only written of one variation of imperialism, that “of capitalism in decay,” but that the Soviet invasion represented “an imperialism peculiar to the Stalinist bureaucracy.”⁷⁷ Shachtman further argued that the Stalinist bureaucracy, self-servingly looking to strengthen its hold on the Soviet Union, hoped to gain access to the natural resources of Finland. In so doing, it engaged in the “subjugation and oppression of other peoples,” becoming an imperialist power.⁷⁸ While the CPUSA and the Cannonites emphasized capitalism as the cause and defining feature of imperialism, Shachtman and the SWP minority argued that an expansionist act alone, regardless of the preexisting economic conditions, marked imperialism. Thus, despite the fact that Finland had the backing of foreign capitalists, who the SWP Minority still did regard as imperialists,⁷⁹ the invasion could not be countenanced with Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

⁷⁴ Shachtman, “The Crisis in the American Party.”

⁷⁵ Socialist Workers Party Minority of the Political Committee, “Second World War and the Soviet Union,” *New Internationalist* 6, no. 2 (March 1940), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol06/no02/minority.htm> (accessed October 17, 2011).

⁷⁶ Shachtman, “The Soviet Union and the World War.”

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Burnham, “The Politics of Desperation.”

The SWP minority also claimed that the invasion of Finland, as an outgrowth of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, served the purposes of German imperialism. Stalin had essentially become Hitler's henchman, a pawn in Germany's push for conquest of Europe. Shachtman wrote that "Berlin 'obviously pushed' Stalin towards Helsinki."⁸⁰ According to Shachtman, Hitler had two motivations. First, through its invasion of Finland, the Soviet Union became "more deeply in the war on Hitler's side." Furthermore, Hitler hoped that Stalin would oust, in Shachtman's words, "Anglo-French imperialism" from northern Europe.⁸¹ The SWP Minority indeed recognized Finland's close ties to Western capitalist nations. However, they did not consider the potential Soviet conquest of Finland a deliverance from capitalist imperialism. Rather, subjugation to the imperial delusions of Hitler and Stalin replaced capitalist imperialism.

As the above discussion demonstrates, three quite different accounts of the invasion of Finland emerged from the leadership of the American Far Left. The American Communist Party defended Soviet action as necessary to the defense of the Soviet Union against Western capitalist imperialism. A majority of the Trotskyist SWP believed that Stalin wrongly invaded Finland because it directed the wrath of Finland's imperialist allies against the Soviet Union. However, they also believed that this capitalist indignation threatened the workers' state, making defense of the Soviet Union imperative. Finally, a minority faction in the SWP declared Soviet action inexcusably imperialist because it was territorial expansionist, undermined international socialism, resulted in the oppression of Finland, and subordinated the Soviet Union to German expansionary aims.

A common theme emerges out of these diverse responses. Regardless of whether they supported or opposed the invasion, American Marxists couched their arguments in the same

⁸⁰ Shachtman, "The Soviet Union and the World War."

⁸¹ Shachtman, "The Soviet Union and the World War."

language, the language of imperialism. In a movement committed to opposing capitalist imperialism, the invasion of Finland, as well as the events that preceded it, endangered the exclusive association of imperialism with capitalism. In essence, a single question subsumed the separate spheres of debate existing within the CPUSA and the Trotskyist movement: Who acted as the imperialist in the Russo-Finnish war? In other words, was imperialism still reserved for only capitalist nations? Or had the communist state that Lenin founded violated one of his core beliefs? For leading American Marxists, the invasion of Finland confirmed whether the Soviet Union stood as a bastion against imperialist expansion or had become an imperialist power of its own.

The multiple interpretations of imperialism among American Marxists should not come as a surprise. Indeed, some of Lenin's contemporary Marxist thinkers, such as Karl Kautsky, were not fully convinced of the validity of Lenin's conclusion that a capitalist economic system alone determined imperialist expansion.⁸² Furthermore, scholars have argued that Lenin's *Imperialism* "was never meant to represent the final scientific statement on the problem of capitalist expansion and advanced capitalist state coercion."⁸³ Yet, Lenin and his theory of imperialism obtained status within Marxist movements rivaled only by Marx himself. Willoughby writes that Lenin was "the only Communist 'saint' embraced by nearly all Marxian movements. Trotskyists, Stalinists, and Maoists could all agree that Lenin's *Imperialism* presented a profound scientific achievement."⁸⁴ Indeed, the numerous references to imperialism in American Marxists' response to the invasion of Finland, both in justification and criticism of the Soviet Union, indict the centrality of imperialist theory in Marxist thought. Given the elevated place of Lenin and imperialism in American Marxist movements, the diverse

⁸² John Willoughby, "Evaluating the Leninist Theory of Imperialism," *Science & Society* 59, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 326.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 321.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 322.

interpretations of imperialism and its relation to the Soviet Union after the invasion of Finland were particularly divisive.

Thus, the invasion of Finland generated a new degree of divisiveness and polarity among American Marxists. Differences between existing stances on the Soviet Union became increasingly irreparable. Cannon wrote in a letter to a fellow Trotskyist on December 15, 1939, following a party debate with Shachtman and Burnham over the invasion of Finland and the nature of the Soviet Union, “As becomes clearer every day, what is involved is not simply an ordinary discussion in which different opinions are presented, but an irreconcilable struggle in which sides are being taken.” He continued by explaining that the invasion of Finland pushed Shachtman across “the bridge” between Cannon and the “anti-Bolshevik position of Burnham.”⁸⁵ A great ideological chasm now separated Cannonites and Shachtmanites. Accusations of supporting imperialism flowed from both sides. Burnham complained, “Cannon and Trotsky tell us: But then you want the imperialists to take over the Soviet Union. This is nothing but the standard slander.”⁸⁶ By May 1940, Shachtman, Burnham, and others broke away from the SWP and formed their own Workers’ Party.

At the same time, the split between the CPUSA and the Trotskyist factions was reinforced. CPUSA member Amter wrote, “Trotskyites, stoolpigeons of the Dies Committee [the first manifestation of the anti-Communist House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1938] and reaction, pretend to support the Finnish people against the Helsinki government. But their main objective, openly stated, is to overthrow the Soviet Government, which is the aim of the imperialist powers.”⁸⁷ Because the CPUSA did not see any discord between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the Soviet Union, it construed Shachtmanite and even Cannonite criticism of

⁸⁵ Cannon, “A Letter to Farrell Dobbs,” 119.

⁸⁶ Burnham, “The Politics of Desperation.”

⁸⁷ Amter, *The Truth About Finland*, 15.

Stalin, and particularly his association with imperialism, as blasphemous. Trotskyists responded with equal vigor. In a May 1941 essay, Joseph Friedman, an ally of Shachtman and Burnham in the SWP Minority who wrote under the name Joseph Carter, presented a scathing critique of the American Communist Party. He accused the Party of blindly following Stalin's foreign policy vacillations, swinging wildly from support for democratic imperialists during the Popular Front to support for German fascist imperialism. In so doing, they abandoned "the small states whose defense was a major item in the Communist propaganda yesterday (Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Romania)."⁸⁸ In sum, proponents of each of the three positions on the invasion of Finland accused the other positions of supporting imperialism, a hefty charge given the importance of imperialism in Leninist-Marxist theory. The invasion of Finland thus accentuated already existing divisions among American Marxists.

But while proponents of each position attacked one another, each was essentially a defensive position, meant to limit in-party losses in the face of public outcry. Indeed, members of American far left were the target of the pamphlets, letters, and newspaper and journal articles. As Cannon wrote, "I would be very glad to defend the Soviet Union at a public meeting...unfortunately my first task was to defend the Soviet Union in our own party."⁸⁹ Furthermore, the language used would have been familiar to Marxists, but not to Americans in the political mainstream. Thus, while the Shachtman position made no attempt to defend the Soviet Union, its extensive use of Marxian terminology was an effort to redeem and defend socialism among already committed Marxists.

A significant number of American Marxists believed their party leaders' arguments. While the debate within the SWP wrenched the party in two, it appears that the combined

⁸⁸ Joseph Carter, "Stalinism and the War," *New Internationalist* 7, no. 4 (May 1941), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/carter/1941/05/stalinism-war.htm> (accessed October 13, 2011).

⁸⁹ Cannon, "A Letter to Farrell Dobbs," 120.

membership of the post-split SWP and the WP remained only slightly less than pre-split levels, roughly 1,000 members.⁹⁰ Likewise, CPUSA sympathizers such as novelist Theodore Dreiser (who in fact joined the CPUSA in 1945) echoed Foster and Browder in his 1941 book, *America is Worth Saving*. He argued that Finland represented a grave danger to the Soviet Union that had to be eliminated because of its close connection to Western capitalist nations.⁹¹ A degree of fervor remained among a number of American Marxists.

Nevertheless, many rank-and-file members became disillusioned with communism following the invasion of Finland. Given the CPUSA's prominence on the far left of American politics (its membership had peaked at 66,000 in January 1939⁹²), this trend was especially noticeable among the CPUSA. Khelr, Haynes, and Anderson list CPUSA membership at 50,000 by 1941, 16,000 fewer than two years earlier. They argue that the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was central to this membership decline.⁹³ However, the invasion of Finland must be seen as a contributing factor, the decisive event in a string of controversial Soviet actions. Louis Fischer, an American writer and Soviet sympathizer during the 1930s, wrote of "Kronstadts" (in reference to the Bolshevik suppression of a 1921 uprising), or points where Marxists abandoned the Soviet Union or even communism as a whole. While Fischer himself rejected the Soviet Union following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, he writes that many "did not 'leave the train' to stop at 'Kronstadt' until Russia invaded Finland...Finland was their ideological melting point."⁹⁴ Peter Kivisto, a leading scholar on Finnish-Americans, notes that many Finnish-American communists left the party and joined more mainstream organizations. Likewise, many black

⁹⁰ Robert Jackson Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 805.

⁹¹ Theodore Dreiser, *America Is Worth Saving* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1941), 45.

⁹² Khelr, Haynes, and Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism*, 72.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Louis Fischer, "Louis Fischer," in *The God That Failed: Why Six Great Writers Rejected Communism*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), 201.

communists in Harlem became disillusioned and renounced their membership.⁹⁵ Even the mainstream American press recognized the growing discontent within the American Far Left after the invasion. *The Washington Post* noted that many former Soviet sympathizers had “mind[s] that cannot be controlled from Moscow” and thus “could not make the rapid backward somersaults ordered by Stalin.”⁹⁶ Thus, for many rank-and-file members of the CPUSA as well as other former supporters of the Soviet Union, the invasion of Finland was the final straw.

The fundamental weakening of the Trotskyist movement was less noticeable but also indicated some of the problems the American far left faced. Ward argues that the split in the SWP following the invasion represented a significant event in “the evolution of the deradicalizing of the anti-Stalinist left.”⁹⁷ Indeed, many Trotskyists eventually abandoned Marxism altogether, including James Burnham. Thus, the invasion of Finland concluded a particularly shaky period in the history of American Marxism, after which the movement stood further divided and weakened.

While defense of the three positions on the Soviet invasion of Finland met mixed results among already committed Marxists, the debate in general reveals a fundamental weakness of Marxism in the United States—its disconnect from mainstream thought. Not only were membership numbers small (and decreasing), but also the defensive, insular, and theoretical nature of discussion within the far left did not lend credence to the Communist or Trotskyist movement among the American public. While the *New York Times* and other major American newspapers carried stories of the bombings of civilians and the plights of common Finns,⁹⁸ American Marxists engaged in theoretical debate, shifting attention away from the war itself.

⁹⁵ Kivisto, “Finnish Americans and the Homeland, 1918-1958,” 17.

⁹⁶ “Radicals and Reds,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1939.

⁹⁷ Ward, *The New York Intellectuals*, 192.

⁹⁸ “Soviet Blow Heavy,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1939.

The mainstream American press noticed this and condemned efforts to deflect attention from human suffering. A *New York Times* editorial by Edwin James criticized the CPUSA's *Daily Worker*'s account of the invasion, writing, "It would be ludicrous if it were not so tragic."⁹⁹ *The Washington Post* described the CPUSA reporting as "gross distortions of news...reckless editorial assertions...fabricated with specific purpose in mind."¹⁰⁰ But while the mainstream media focused on the serious aspects of the war and egregious violations of journalism, it also took time to mock Communists. On December 2, *The Washington Post* listed the CPUSA's response to the invasion under the title "Today's Best Laugh."¹⁰¹ The invasion of Finland thus accentuated the great disconnect between the majority of Americans and the Marxist minority, further relegating Marxists to the sidelines of American politics.

Notably, none of these articles reference the intense debates within the American Marxism, which resulted in the split of the SWP and the significant membership loss of the CPUSA. Rather, the media portrayed Marxists—represented in newspapers by the CPUSA—as single-minded, immoral, and intensely loyal to a foreign power. Communists and socialists are "othered" and painted as well outside the pale of acceptable American society. This vilification and isolation, only strengthened during the Cold War, continue to mark American political attitudes towards Marxism.

But the significance of American Marxists' response to the Russo-Finnish war is not limited to American politics. It also suggests a larger, global pattern: Marxists worldwide interpreted Soviet policies differently, resulting in debates and disagreements. Indeed, for an ideological movement, any perceived breach of ideology by that movement's leader could prove disastrous. This, of course, suggests further research questions. To what extent can the failure of

⁹⁹ Edwin L. James, "Soviet Russia Adopts Technique of Germany," *New York Times*, December 3, 1939.

¹⁰⁰ "Working for Russia," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 1939.

¹⁰¹ "Today's Best Laugh," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 1939.

communism or another of its Marxist variants to take root in the world be attributed to the conduct of the Soviet Union? How did Soviet actions change the perception of communism worldwide? Thus, the invasion of Finland can serve as a window through which to access broader questions of ideological cohesiveness, durability, and propagation.

In conclusion, American Marxists' response to the invasion of Finland was diverse and consequently divisive, particularly because it allowed previously held views on the Soviet Union to be cloaked in the language of imperialism. As a result, the Far Left in the United States stood weaker and more divided than ever. Thus, contrary to what many may believe, Marxism in the U.S. did not form a monolithic political bloc that paid homage to a foreign power. Rather, it was subject to intense debates in which core tenets of ideology were questioned. As the case of Max Shachtman especially reveals, some Marxists criticized the Soviet Union as fervently as the American political mainstream. But, nevertheless, Marxists stood detached from the mainstream. Therefore, the invasion of Finland is indicative of a dual crisis in American Marxism and perhaps a crisis of Marxism worldwide: internal division and external isolation. Together, these factors helped to keep Marxism in the United States weak.

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