

On 'Hailing' Brezhnev's Afghan Policy

For well over a year, we have been involved in a continuing polemic with the Spartacists over the political adaptation to the Stalinist bureaucracy implicit in their slogan "Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!" We counterposed the slogan, "Military Victory to the Soviet Army!" The Spartacist League's latest polemic on this question appears in *Workers Vanguard*, 21 July. In this piece, the SL scribblers claim that, "during World War II the Trot-skyists certainly did hail the victories of the Red Army against Nazi Germany." As proof they quote American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon's 1942 remark: "The Red Army that the world hails is an army created by a proletarian revolution." But, as anyone who can read can tell, *Cannon was not "hailing" anything*. He merely noted that after the Nazi attack on the USSR in 1941, "the world" (or more exactly that section of it that favored a victory of the Allies) was hailing the Soviet army. Cannon had touched on this point earlier in the same speech: "Churchill and Roosevelt pay hypocritical tribute today to 'the great Russian people' and 'the heroic Red Army'."

Cannon did not propose that the Fourth International should begin to "hail" (or pay tribute to) Stalin's military operations as the SL casuists suggest. Instead he adhered to the programmatic perspective laid down by Trotsky:

"During the military struggle against Hitler, the revolutionary workers will strive to enter into the closest possible comradely relations with the rank-and-file fighters of the Red Army. While arms in hand they deal blows to Hitler, the Bolshevik-Leninists will at the same time conduct revolutionary propaganda against Stalin preparing his overthrow at the next and perhaps very near stage.

"...Our defense of the USSR is carried on under the slogan: 'For Socialism! For the World Revolution! Against Stalin!'"

—*In Defense of Marxism*

While the CPUSA and its sister parties were "hailing" the Soviet military, the Trotskyists combined agitation for defense of the collectivized property of the USSR with calls for a political revolution *against* the bureaucracy. Cannon explained this in his speech:

"Our policy is the policy of the Russian section of the Fourth International, which lives and fights. And they

continue at their task—to defend the country, to rebuild the Bolshevik party, to revive the soviets and the trade unions, and to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy."

The question of "hailing" the Stalinist military came up in 1939 during the historic faction fight in the Socialist Workers Party against the revisionist opposition, led by Max Shachtman, which no longer wished to defend the USSR. Shachtman had a different agenda than the contemporary SL, but he shared their interest in blurring the line between political and military support to the USSR in conflicts with capitalist states. Thus he facetiously asked: if the USSR remained a workers state, "why does not the majority propose to hail the advance of the Red Army into Poland..." as revolutionaries had in Lenin's day. In response Trotsky explained quite clearly why the Fourth International did not propose to hail Stalin's Red Army:

"This newness in the situation [as compared to 1920] is the bankruptcy of the Third International, the degeneracy of the Soviet state, the development of the Left Opposition, and the creation of the Fourth International....And these events explain sufficiently why we have radically changed our position toward the politics of the Kremlin, including its military politics."

—*In Defense of Marxism*

Afghanistan is not Poland. The social and economic integration of Afghanistan into the Soviet Union in the 1980s would have represented greater social progress for the Afghan masses than the incorporation of Poland into the USSR in 1939 would have meant for the Polish workers. But the reason that the Fourth International refused to "hail" the Red Army, while militarily supporting it against Hitler's armies, had nothing to do with Poland's level of economic and social development compared to the USSR—it was, as Trotsky made clear, because of the *political character* of the Stalinist bureaucracy which controlled the army. Fifty years later, Gorbachev's pullout from Afghanistan (a betrayal of Afghan women, leftists and others who placed their trust in the USSR) once again demonstrates the correctness of Trotsky's refusal to hail the "military politics" of the Stalinist ruling caste. ■