Revived 45: Anarchists Against the Army

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Philip Sansom — one of the editors of War Commentary found guilty of incitement to disaffection — describes the background to the trial and two other offences, for which he was jailed three times in 1945.

Soldiers are not supposed to think and it is a criminal offence to encourage them to do so. The laws on disaffection of the forces prescribe heavy penalties against civilians approaching soldiers and asking them to question their blind obedience to authority. 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die', as Tennyson put it, is the army's attitude to its own first victims: the men it pulls into its ranks and bends to its will.

Whereas today, Britain has an army of 'professionals', in the last two major wars she has relied upon conscripts — young men and women with, normally, no interest in going into the forces, but who accept conscription because they see no alternative. In the second, incidentally, Britain conscripted women for the armed forces, while Germany did not. The Nazis had this male chauvinist pig thing about a woman's place being in the home, breeding pure Aryans for the master race. The British government, more pragmatic, put single women in the forces or on the land and set up nursery schools for children whose mothers were directed into factories.

Undoubtedly many of these individuals believed in doing their bit for their country and would have joined up voluntarily anyway. Many did so in the first two years of the First World War, but by 1916 the High Command demanded more cannon fodder and Lloyd George brought in conscription for the first time in Britain. Neville Chamberlain introduced it again in June 1939 — three months before the Second World War actually began.

Many of these conscripts came from families which had lost fathers or uncles in the First World War, had known nothing but depression and unemployment since, or were influenced by the anti-war and socialist feelings still prevalent even in the Labour Party right into the late 1930s. They tended to be unwilling soldiers, but equally unwilling, in the mass, to resist. Hitler's lunatic nationalism, playing upon Germany's economic and psychological suffering after the 1918 defeat, which stirred up the Germans to war fever, had no equivalent here. The prevalent attitude was simply that of having to 'stop Hitler', get 'the job done' and get back home. After all, Britain had 'won' the First World War — and a fat lot of good that had done the working man.

Churchill's gross rhetoric no doubt whipped up enthusiasm among Tory ladies to knit balaclava helmets and collect more saucepans 'for Britain' (and even, such were the weird bedfellows they had to embrace, eventually to organise 'Aid for Russia') but for the workers, bombed in their

shelters by night and sweating in their factories by day, there were few illusions about Churchill. Nor about their own positions. They were caught like rats in a trap and knew no alternative but to sweat it out. The voices of revolution — the only alternative to sweating it out — were few and weak.

The only thing we had going for us was the truth, notoriously the first casualty of war. Britain during the war was very near to being a neo-fascist state itself. Everyone had to carry an identity card; food, clothing and goods of all kinds were strictly rationed (for the general population, anyway) and everyone was subject to conscription or the direction of labour. There are, however, important qualifications, which it would be unfair to ignore. First, there was provision for conscientious objection, which the fascist states (and some of the other 'democratic' ones, like France and Russia) did not allow. This was of course, circumscribed by the law, and COs had to convince tribunals of magistrate-type individuals that they were sincere and not just 'dodging the column'. Most had to accept alternative service — on the land, in civil defence, the ambulance service, the fire service and so on. Very few were given unconditional exemption, but on the other hand, many were able to survive in a kind of underground which would have been much more difficult in a fully fascist state.

And — the great advantage for those of us who were prepared to make open propaganda — a relatively large degree of 'free' speech and 'free' publication was 'permitted'; my quotes indicate that the usual laws of sedition, lese majeste, libel, etc., plus the wartime regulations, governed all this.

The reasons for this were complex but clear. Britain was a 'democracy' fighting totalitarian states. After America was dragged into the war, Roosevelt and Churchill discovered that 'freedom' was a war aim. In both America and Britain there was a tradition of press freedom jealously guarded by the capitalist press for their own interests and voluntarily limited by them in the national state's interest. It was understood by the authorities that there was a vocal minority opposed to the war and prepared to make a nuisance of itself saying so. British experience in the First World War taught the government that to try to crush these people was more trouble than it was worth. Even inside Parliament there was an opposition within the coalition which did not want all anti-conservative or socialist opinion suppressed — it had its eyes on the eventual postwar election! Above all, since the revolutionary forces were so small, it suited the state far more to keep us sweet, legal and out in the open where it could keep its eyes upon us, rather than drive us underground into illegal channels. Finally, it accorded well with the propaganda about democracy and freedom and all that.

What, after all, did the anti-war movement amount to? There were the pacifists, mainly Christian — Quakers, some Methodists, etc., mainly organised, if at all, in the Peace Pledge Union, with its paper, Peace News — with a smaller, militant, secularist wing originally called 'The Ginger Group', that spilled over somewhat into the anarchist movement. (A completely separate, insular, Christian sect were the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were completely intransigent about war service and many of whom went to prison.) There was the anarchist movement, small but quite clear and united, with the exception of some of the Spanish exiles, recently (i.e., 1939) fled from Spain, who held that the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini would inevitably lead to the downfall of Franco. These comrades, experienced in the anti-fascist struggle in Spain, had much to tell us about the Spanish Revolution, but were sadly naive about world politics. We knew the 'democracies' would much rather see a fascist state in Spain than another revolution, and we have been proved right.

There were also various socialist parties opposed to the war. Most fundamentalist (we compared them to the JWs in the Christian field) was the Socialist Party of Great Britain — SPGB. Comparable with the anarchists in influence and numbers, they nevertheless maintained a careful and constitutional position which posed no threat to the authorities — but practically every one of their members who appeared before a CO tribunal got off military service on the strength of the party's fundamental opposition to war. There was the Independent Labour Party — the rump of the traditional Labour movement's anti-war battalions.

There were the Trotskyists, maintaining a slightly uneasy position (as ever) in view of an antifascist position linked with a traditional pre-Stalin, Trotsky-Leninist-Bolshevik opposition to capitalist war, bolstered by their hatred of Stalin (murderer of their own leader) and rejection of the Soviet Union as a decadent bureaucratic corruption of a workers' state…which was still…nevertheless…the nearest thing they had to a Marxist-Leninist proletarian dictatorship…etc…etc. The Trotskyists concentrated on the working-class struggle at home; a valid enough activity which eventually brought them under attack from the government, after years of slander and vicious attack (both verbal and physical) from the Communists.

The Communist Party (Stalinist, as we would now identify it) changed its line three times during the war. For the first 10 days, in September 1939, the CP supported the war, seeing it as continuation of the anti-fascist struggle, and being just a wee bit slow in understanding the implications of the Hitler-Stalin pact 'for Peace and Socialism' which had been concluded in August. After 10 days of vocal devotion to the antifascist struggle, however, the British CP got its orders from Moscow and promptly switched its line to opposition to the war, now using class arguments common to the Left: that it was a capitalist-imperialist war in which the working class had no interest.

It is an interesting sidelight on the fundamental nature of democratic freedoms that — following the fall of France in 1940 with the subsequent possibility of invasion — the Communist Daily Worker was banned. It was the only daily paper in the country to suffer that fate; it was of course the only daily paper to oppose the war at any time. But the opposition did not last long, for as soon as Hitler invaded Russia, in June 1941, the Communist Party reversed its line to support for the war once again. Immediately, the ban on the Daily Worker was lifted — Stalin was now an ally of democracy.

From that moment on, the Churchill government had no more loyal patriotic allies than the Communist Party, who happily joined with the Tory ladies in all their war efforts, and campaigned behind huge portraits of Churchill, Roosevelt, Chiang Kai-Chek (the anti-Communist Chinese nationalist leader), Tito, de Gaulle (leader of the 'Free French') and many others now lost in the mists of cold war and revisionism. Having been told to change their line themselves they now declared that anyone opposed to the war was a fascist traitor and 'Agent of Hitler', and, although it was clearly impossible, they screamed incessantly 'Second Front Now!'

The minority papers — War Commentary (Anarchist), Peace News (PPU), Socialist Standard (SPGB), Socialist Leader (ILP), etc. — had no resources to affect the security of the state and in any case had no interest in helping the enemy. We were revolutionaries, not traitors. Because we would not fight for Churchill and the British Empire (remember Britain still ruled in India, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia…) did not mean that we wanted Hitler to win. What we wanted — and what anarchists in Germany, Italy, France, America, Japan and, as far as we could guess, in Russia too, wanted — was for the people of their own countries to make a social revolution against their own warring rulers, to establish a social order in which capitalism, with all the internal and

external violence upon which it depends (crystallised for the anarchists in 'the state') was swept away and replaced by the truly free society.

It was, after all, only a very few years since we had had the Spanish Revolution of 1936 to inspire us, and it was not difficult to see the war as the death-throes of capitalism. Looking back a mere 25 years to the end of the First World War, we saw a history of revolutionary upheavals, not only in Russia, but also in Germany and Italy, while in Britain the 1920s had seen bitter class war and the General Strike, and the 1930s saw the same in France and the beginnings of the Chinese Revolution. Even Hitler's coming to power was a bastard form of revolution against the old order. Change and collapse were in the air.

We were not alone in seeing this, of course. Our rulers saw it all quite clearly, and as usual, were able to act upon their knowledge better than the working class. Just as Churchill had his plans to do a deal with the Germans if the Russians 'went too far' at the end of the war, so he also had his plans for dealing with any potentially revolutionary situation in this country.

The end of a war, win or lose, is always a dangerous time for government. The losers are disillusioned and looking for revenge; the winners are confident and looking for rewards. Millions of people with no love for their rulers have been trained in armed combat. Men who have done desperate deeds, seen fearful sights, on the field of battle, are not likely to be too fussy about methods in dealing with their class enemies. It is very difficult to control the flow of arms between countries and within countries when armies are coming home laden with their trophies. A returning army, even of victors, is a potential threat to a ruling class.

It is thus quite a logical move for a government to do its best to weaken any vocal revolutionary groups in its midst — to silence voices which might encourage soldiers to fight for themselves after years of fighting for their masters. No government can tolerate a people in arms, and the Second World War gave us two classic examples of how warring governments use each other to subdue revolutionary uprisings.

In 1943 the Italian people rose up and destroyed the Mussolini regime, only to be bombed into submission by the British Royal Air Force, who rained high explosives on the working-class areas of Turin, Milan and Genoa. While the Italians were still picking up the pieces and counting their dead, the Germans swept into Italy and took over, trying — albeit contemptuously — to rally the demoralised Italian army, restoring law and order', and dealing with those revolutionaries who had come out into the open after twenty years of Fascist repression.

Later, the Russians played a similar game in Poland, halting their hitherto rapid advance on Warsaw when the resistance fighters in the capital emerged from their cellars to attack the retreating Germans. Admittedly here the emigre Polish 'government' in London had played a part, hoping to get some Polish forces in control in Warsaw before the Russians arrived, and sending instructions to the Polish underground to make its move. But seeing the Russians halted, the Nazis halted too — and returned to raze Warsaw to the ground and crush the armed resistance workers. Only then did the Russian tanks roll forward again, to take control of a dazed and decimated population.

There is some evidence that, of the Allied war leaders, Roosevelt felt some shame about this — but none that any such feeling was betrayed by either Churchill or Stalin. Churchill, let it never be forgotten, was not merely a war leader. He was an astute and experienced right-wing politician, famous, before the war, for his ready use of troops in the Siege of Sidney Street and the Welsh valleys during a miners' strike and his alacrity in diverting troops from the German war in 1917

to send them to the rescue of the Romanovs in Russia. He was an alert counter-revolutionary, ready at all times to use the full force of the British state against his own class enemies.

Towards the end of the war there were signs that the British working class was beginning to give up its uncomplaining class-collaboration. In the autumn of 1944 the miners at the Betteshanger Colliery, in Kent, after five years of unremitting toil for the war effort, staged the first — and only — wartime strike in Britain's coalfields. Nor was this the only sign that the British workers, sensing the end of the war, were determined that there should be no return to the terrible conditions of unemployment and poverty that had been their lot in the 1930s.

Indeed, six months before the Special Branch raided the anarchists, they had launched a successful attack upon the Trotskyists, four of whose leaders were jailed for inciting a strike — something which was not to be tolerated in wartime!

The attacks upon Trotskyists and anarchists, then, should be seen in a certain context. When Colin Ward asks, 'Why was the prosecution brought in the first place?', I feel that he is not using the advantage of hindsight. We certainly did not know it at the time, but there was already a great deal of disaffection among the British forces. Just as the working class in industry was asking what was going to follow the war, so the working class in uniform was asking the same question. Once D-day had been successful, it was obvious that Germany was losing the war. Hitler had made stupid mistakes in attacking Russia (not even 'necessary', since Stalin was honouring his part of the 1939 bargain by supplying Germany with oil and grain!) and then declaring war on America after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (though the US was still isolationist, as far as Europe was concerned). This new situation, by the end of 1941 created an alliance of industrial and military power the Third Reich could not possibly withstand. Although the Allies between them had neither the troops nor the commanders of the calibre the crack Nazi divisions had at the beginning of the war, they had the weight of men, metal and materials — and, of course, the Russian winter.

Germany was finished by the time the Russians reached Warsaw and the Americans reached Paris; it was only Churchill's stubborn demand for 'unconditional surrender' that kept the Germans fighting. How much the ordinary squaddy knew this, I don't know, but it seems obvious now that fewer and fewer soldiers were prepared to add their names to the lists of late casualties in a war they hated anyway.

Ironically, this was not something we found out until we were actually in prison. Once we got inside, we found the nicks full to overflowing, not with criminals from the home front but with soldiers sentenced by military courts in France, Italy, Germany, for desertion and subsequent offences. When a soldier deserts in a foreign country in wartime, how is he to survive? He has been trained to use a gun, so he survives by armed robbery, by hold-ups, by black-marketeering, by selling government property and by gun-running. We heard hair-raising stories of the sale of fleets of lorries and masses of material, food, petrol and oil — all of which was in short supply in the countries our boys were 'liberating'. In the process our boys were liberating themselves — until they were caught by the military police. Then they got enormous sentences, of 10, 15, 25, 30 years' imprisonment — and shipped back to England to serve them. Returning soldiers' tales elaborated this story of mass desertions. One ex-8th Army man told us that by the time his unit had travelled from toe to top of Italy, 80 per cent had deserted — and the remainder fell in behind a victory march of Tito's partisans in Trieste to show where their political sympathies lay.

These men were mainly soldiers, but there was a fair sprinkling from the Royal Navee and the RAF, and they were being delivered to the main London 'reception' prisons in batches of

20 or 30, two or three times a week. Pentonville, closed in the 1930s, had to be re-opened to deal with the rush. I myself was part of a working party sent over from the Scrubs to clean and redecorate the dirty old dump. In the event, of course, these men served only small periods of their long sentences. They were distributed to local prisons around the country — presumably to the prisons nearest their home towns — and after a few months, quietly given a 'special release' and, of course, a dishonourable discharge. The prisons could not possibly have held them all, but back at their units, the sentences were supposed to have a deterrent effect upon their fellows.

Now, none of this was known to the people at home — except relatives of the men shipped back in disgrace, and they kept quiet. Even we — who had contacts in the army in this country — had great difficulty in finding out what was going on abroad. The censorship saw to that. No word reached this country about the feelings of our soldiers when they made contact with the civilians of either occupied or enemy countries. But when we spoke to them in prison (and I can honestly say that there was no antagonism between those fighting men and us 'conchies' — except perhaps on the part of a few ex-officers in for fiddling the mess accounts and such-like gentlemanly offences) they told us how they felt about the suffering and the destruction they had seen. The truth had dawned upon them — that the Italians were not all fascist beasts; that the German workers, struggling just to survive in their factories and their homes, were not all Nazi monsters, but were victims of their lunatic regimes, caught in a whole series of crazy, complicated traps, just as they were themselves. So they quit. They walked away from the war, just as later so many Americans in Vietnam were to do and, even, a few of our 'professionals' in Northern Ireland are doing now.

The point I am making then, is that the anti-war groups in Britain, whilst making propaganda against the war, did not know the extent of the disaffection in the actual theatres of the war. And it was happening without having anything to do with us (compare Lenin in Switzerland in 1917!); it was simply the war-weariness and revulsion common to the end of every war.

But the government knew it! So, for these reasons, plus the fact that we provided a scapegoat for an unpleasant fact, it set out to crush our small revolutionary voice before the soldiers came home. This is the main answer to why we were prosecuted at that time. There is a supplementary answer too, that may explain the timing of the attack by the Special Branch. That is, that in the autumn of 1944, a serious split occurred in the ranks of the Anarchist Federation between a syndicalist faction (who later formed the Syndicalist Workers' Federation) in cooperation with the Spanish exiles already referred to, against the 'pure' anarchists. It could be that the Special Branch, like the jackals they are, thought that a time of dissension and apparent weakness was a good time to do for the anarchists. A lesson for today!

In the event, the undoubted rebellious spirit among the returning warriors was safely defused by the General Election of 1945 when the electorate showed its gratitude to Churchill by booting him out and returning the Labour Party with an enormous majority on what Emmanuel Shinwell described as the revolutionary programme of nationalisation and the welfare state. So that was that! It had seemed to us, until the Special Branch made its move, that in fact we had very little success with our attempts at disaffection. As Colin indicates, the prosecution was unable to produce a single soldier ready to admit he had been disaffected. No doubt the Special Branch has learned more about the use of agents provocateurs since then!

We had a list of about 200 contacts in the forces, most of whom simply subscribed to War Commentary in the usual way and some of whom asked for pamphlets or booklets, or received our monthly circular letter. Until we were raided we had quietly maintained these contacts and

occasionally one of these conscripts would visit us while on leave. We saved a few souls, I suppose. There was one tank driver who was whipped out of his job and transferred to the Pioneer Corps a week before his unit left for France. We had never met him, but he subscribed to War Commentary and had ordered a few pamphlets. He was of course delighted; he probably owes his life to our little organisation.. — but it was hardly disaffection!

Well, there was one thin, pale, sensitive little soldier who visited us one weekend and went sadly back on Sunday night. At midnight on Monday, there was this tap on the door — and there he was again, saying, 'I can't stand another day of army life!' Without saying a word to us, he had simply gone back to pick up his belongings and walked out. He eventually became a poet…And of course there was Colin Ward. How were we to know then what a contribution he was to make to the anarchist movement? He is, as usual, over-modest in saying 'They emerged to make Freedom the outstanding journal it was in the 1940s', for he, too, was a member of the editorial board at that time — a very constructive period in the paper's history. Colin himself went on afterwards to make Anarchy (first series) the outstanding monthly journal it was in the 1960s, producing 118 issues under his sole editorship.

For my part, I achieved a little more notoriety after the main trial. On the day before my release from the Scrubs (for disaffection of the, forces, remember), I was served' with a call-up notice to present myself for medical examination — in order to be conscripted into the Forces! This was clearly a move by the Special Branch to harass me further (they had been furious at the leniency of our sentences) and of course it worked, since I refused to submit to a medical, and was subsequently awarded another sentence of six months.

By this time, however, it was 1946. The war was well and truly over and the Freedom Defence Committee was able to mount a vigorous campaign on my behalf, in which even the New Statesman thundered about 'nonsense' and spiteful prosecution. I was let out on special release, after six weeks, for which, I was assured, I should thank Herbert Morrison (erstwhile conchie of the First World War) then Home Secretary. Instead I thanked my comrades of the Defence Committee. It might be worth, some time, returning to a consideration of the anarchist movement in wartime. The issues were sharp, the enemy well defined and anarchist attitudes were clear and uncompromising. Organisation had, perforce, to be tight, but there was a high degree of solidarity and mutual aid not only within, but between the anti-war groups in the sort of 'underground' that grew up. Those who went to prison had a sharp lesson in the nature of authority which democracy sometimes blurs, and the attack on the anarchists, far from weakening us, brought us added strength and support.

Another thing we learned was the truth of the saying attributed to Frederick the Great: 'If my soldiers began to think, not one of them would stay in the ranks.' It would seem that the greatest disaffecter of them all is war itself — especially, as Vietnam and Northern Ireland show, a war that cannot be won.

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