

George Woodcock

The Libertarians and the Cold War

1954

I believe that there is always need for a perpetual re-consideration of the validity of every aspect of our viewpoints. In left-wing circles, and particularly among Marxists, the word “revisionism” has often a pejorative sound; I believe that the attitude which this displays merely shows a resistance to growth among the people who hold it. And I am definitely out of sympathy with the romanticism of those last-ditchers who hold their positions out of an illusion of loyalty and a horror of self-contradiction. Every man whose ideas are living and growing must contradict himself many times during his life, and I am with Whitman and Proudhon in finding no reason for shame in this. But I do see reason for shame in holding on to a position unless I believe that, all things considered, it still remains the best and most reasonable.

Therefore I acknowledge and respect Macdonald’s change in his position on war, and I think we should consider carefully what he has to say in his own justification. At the same time I must say that I have found his arguments for radicals to enroll themselves in the cause of the Western states wholly unconvincing.

To begin, Macdonald quotes Karl Liebknecht’s World War I dictum, “The main enemy is at home!” He declares that this classic expression of the anti-militarist (though not necessarily pacifist) position does not hold good, and says: “Those who still believe it I must regard as either uninformed, sentimental, or the dupes of Soviet propaganda (or, of course, all three together).”

Let us begin from there. It is true that some pacifists are uninformed on Russia, and that a few of them — particularly among the Quakers — tend to become the dupes of Soviet propaganda about Russia being the representative of world peace. However, I think that the proportion of opponents of war preparations who are in either of these positions is much smaller than Macdonald believes, and I know that it is not true of any of the anarchists, to whatever branch of our very elastic movement they may belong. For more than thirty years we and our predecessors have been insisting on the reactionary character of Russian communism, and when it was considered unpatriotic in Britain and the United States to denounce Stalin as a dictator no better than Hitler, we were among the few who continued to do so. We are the last ever to have been the dupes of Soviet propaganda.

So, since I am sure that Macdonald would hardly persist in bringing these two accusations against the anarchists at least, I will concentrate on the third accusation, that we are “sentimental”. My contention is that we are in fact more realistic by far than those radicals or ex-radicals who have shouldered their harps of peace and, like the minstrel boy of the ballad, are now to be found in the ranks of war.

To begin, let me say that I do not in the least disagree with Macdonald in preferring the West to the East as a place to live in. Nobody but the most idiotic and starry-eyed fellow-traveller would think it better to live in Moscow than in

London or San Francisco or Montreal or Paris. There is no comparison between the nature of life in a capitalist democracy at the present moment, despite its manifold injustices and discomforts, and the nature of life in Russia or East Germany. And I would agree with Dwight Macdonald that, again at this moment, Soviet communism is “far more inhumane and barbarous as a social system than our own.”

But to agree to these points is not to agree that the political aims of the rulers of the Western states are good, or that the superiority of Western culture is a logical excuse for war, or that this superiority will necessarily last forever — that it will last, for instance, more than a few weeks in the event of an atomic war.

It seems to me, indeed, that far from maintaining those qualities in which Western countries are more advanced than Russia, the kind of war that is likely to ensue under the pretence of defending democracy will be the surest way of all, not of reducing or counter-acting inhumanity and barbarity, but of universalising them. Atomic war, I maintain, is a more certain way of bringing about the collapse of what we regard as civilised values than any amount of Soviet aggression. And for this reason I consider any state that includes in its political and military manoeuvres the threat of atomic war to be as much an “enemy” of mankind in general as any other similar state.

Even without an atomic war, the gulf between American and Russian political life seems to contract with the years. In a little prophetic fantasy which he wrote for the *New York Times*, Bertrand Russell envisaged a future in which the atomic war would be averted because Senator McCarthy would have become President of the United States and would have discovered so little real difference between the outlook of his administration and that of Comrade Malenkov that agreement on spheres of influence would become easy. This may sound far-fetched in fact, but I think that in spirit it is not so, since McCarthy’s activities have been consistently directed towards preparing in America a totalitarian atmosphere which a Communist ruler would find congenial.

But I do not think that McCarthy himself is the only sinister portent in the United States today. He is only an extreme example of a general trend among the ruling elite, and even the Republicans who oppose him do so because they consider him too inefficient and too tactless in his job. Behind the lurid façade of the Congressional committees the work of suppressing the minority opinion goes on quite happily in the hands of the administration; even the Army uses its present bout of shadow boxing with McCarthy as a front to cover a thorough-going plan of discriminating, not only against known Communists, but also against those within its ranks who are merely suspected of left-wing sympathies. Readers of Hannah Arendt’s book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which has done so much to mould Dwight Macdonald’s recent thought, will remember

that she pointed out that one of the most salient characteristics of a totalitarian regime was the creation of a perpetual and persecuted minority. Recent American government proposals to turn Communists or suspected Communists into second-class Americans by depriving them of citizenship are a significant step towards the same process of creating a scapegoat minority, a minority of opinion rather than race. Macdonald asserts that in the United States, the reaction is carried on “furtively and apologetically”; in recent months it has not been McCarthy or any of the protagonists of repressive legislation that has been “furtive or apologetic”, but rather those so-called liberals who could only muster one vote in the Senate against giving McCarthy the funds to carry on his work of witch-hunting. Here is a situation of liberal spinelessness before reactionary aggressiveness which reminds one forcibly of the situation in Italy before the March on Rome and in the Weimar Republic in the days of Hitler’s rise to power during the 1930s. It also reminds one of Trotsky in Russia creating the means of his own destruction by conniving at the persecution of other minorities in the days before his fall from power.

To return to Macdonald’s arguments, he accuses the war-resisters of believing that “the world’s most chauvinist and militaristic government [the Russian] is . . . striving for world peace against the evil machinations of the State Department and the British Foreign Office”. This, again, the anarchists definitely do not believe. On the other hand, I think I speak for many anarchists when I say that they do not allow a belief in the aggressive militarism of Russia to convince them that it is any greater a threat to world peace than the United States. Recent months have undoubtedly shown an increase in American sabre-rattling which has aroused misgiving, not only among war-resisters, but also among British Conservatives and their French equivalents. It is just as possible that war may come through the blundering blusters of Dulles as through the machinations of Malenkov; in this particular moment, it seems certain that, for purely practical reasons, Russia is even less anxious than the United States for a war, but the great danger remains the unplanned one — that the perilous game of bluff and counter-bluff will actually one day spark off a genuine war.

And that war may mean the end of most that we treasure in Western culture — and of much of the good that remains in Russia as well. Macdonald sees the present situation as a “fight to the death between radically different cultures”. I personally do not think the contests of states and politicians can have anything to do with cultures (except, of course, to harm or destroy them). Culture is a product of the talents and thoughts and spiritual impulses of individuals and peoples, it thrives on peace, and lives by other means than the political. Certainly the next war will destroy a vast part of the material capital of twenty-five centuries of world culture; what is worse, it will probably encourage the spread of circumstances

that will inhibit renewal. Already, the very shadow of the Bomb seems to be causing a drying up of the spontaneity of art that is being felt all over the world; in England and France alike, for the first time since the middle of the last century, there are no real *avant gardes* in literature and the arts, and all over the world we are dismally lacking in those achievements of renaissance which followed the peace of 1918.

Macdonald seems to find some comfort in the fact that things in the United States are not so bad as in Russia. He is not wholly unjustified. At the very least it means that individuals living in Western countries have a few years more of comparatively spacious living than their unfortunate fellow men on the other side of the various curtains (though it must not be forgotten that some countries within the western orbit, e.g. Spain and Yugoslavia, are not far behind Russia in the degree of their totalitarianism). "Being on the same road is not the same thing as being there already", Macdonald rightly remarks, and it is also true that "this malign trend [towards totalitarianism] can to some extent be resisted". But, to my mind, it can only be resisted by those who are willing to go the whole hog and point out that all and any states are the seedbeds of tyranny and war. The folly is in those who try to pick and choose, who say, like Macdonald, that they wish to support the Western states but to declare objection to certain aspects, e.g. "the Smith and McCarran Acts, French policy in Indo-China, etc." In fact, as events have shown in the last few months, all these things are integral aspects of American policy which cannot be divided from the whole. They are part of the intolerance and aggressiveness which any expansive state has to maintain in order to keep its initiative.

But, the situation being as it is, what is to be done? Macdonald, it is evident, is extremely uneasy in his new found situation of an unwilling supporter of war against Russia as an eventual possibility, and he admits that it provides no complete solution for the dilemma. But has he in fact examined all other alternatives? There is one significant passage at the end of his Appendices to *The Root is Man*. He says: "The only historically real alternatives in 1939 were to back Hitler's armies, to back the Allies' armies, or to do nothing. But none of these alternatives promised any great benefit for mankind, and the one that finally triumphed has led simply to the replacing of the Nazi by the Communist threat, with the whole ghastly newsreel flickering through once more in a second showing." And if the Communist threat followed the defeat of the Nazi threat, what, one might ask, is likely to follow the defeat of the Communist threat? Is World War III any more likely to produce a peaceful and civilised world than World War II and World War I did? Of course not, unless there is a complete reversal of the attitude of the common people on the question of war. And since that reversal must appear somewhere and at some time, if it is to appear at all,

there is no reason why we should not seek for it now just as well as after another destructive war.

When Macdonald says that the third alternative in 1939 was “doing nothing”, he is really directing a sneer at the protagonists of the policy of war resistance. He believes that non-militaristic resistance will cut no ice with the Communists and that the triumph which Gandhi won over the British in India would have been impossible if he had been faced by the tougher minded Russian Communists. Indeed, it is evident throughout Macdonald’s arguments that he has what seems to me an exaggerated idea of the mechanical perfection of the Communist machine. But no society is in fact, as he would contend, “perfectly dead and closed”. This is an abstraction, and like all abstractions it is riddled with the interstices of contradiction that are opened by the facts of real life. There are in reality well-established instances in which totalitarian governments retreated before movements of non-violent resistance; the recent strikes in Spain, the strikes in Copenhagen during the Nazi occupation, the demonstrations last summer in Berlin and throughout East Germany — all of these had a profoundly disturbing effect on the regimes against which they were directed, and it was found, in Germany at least, that even the trained policemen of the totalitarian order were far from impervious to the example of the resisting people. Furthermore, recent events in Russia have shown that even in the heartland of the Communist order the rulers have found that there can be a limit, even among workers with no civil rights whatever, to the extent to which sacrifices will be accepted. Beyond that limit there begins to appear at least a Schweikian kind of resistance, and concessions are needed; taken together, the recent concessions of the new Russian rulers — withdrawal from collectivity in agriculture, expansion of the supply of consumer goods, softening of cultural controls, and lessening of MVD powers — represent a radical modification of Russian policy which only a consciousness of deep-seated discontent could have induced. Added to such facts as these, there is always the process of softening which all empires in history have experienced when they have spread too far. Indeed, it seems probable that it has been less the threat of American guns than the difficulty of assimilating radically different cultures in Eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia that has kept the Russians back in Europe; they probably realise that even many professed Communists in France and Italy would be part of a great movement of non-cooperation if the Russian armies did march further West, a movement so corrupting that the Red soldiers would be no more proof against it than they were against the glamour of a higher standard of living in Germany and Austria in the first months of the occupation of 1944.

One of the reasons why a conscious and closely linked — if not formally organised — libertarian movement should be active against war in all the countries

where it can work is the fact that it will be able to provide the nucleus for movements of resistance in the case of the imposition of foreign — or home-grown — totalitarianisms. But I think that it is also just possible that such a movement might play a vital part even in the event of atomic war. Perhaps, when we talk of the entire destruction of civilisation by the Bomb, this is a little on the rhetorical side. Certainly the big centres will go in the event of an atomic war, and most of the population as well, but it is just possible that the rural districts and the small towns will remain, and that a new, decentralised form of society will perforce have to emerge on the ruins of the old. If this should happen, then any man who has chosen a constructive rather than a destructive attitude will find his part to play in preventing the rebuilding of the centralised states which will have brought on their own destruction, and in nurturing the appearance of free and autonomous local societies.

Meanwhile, the war is not yet upon us, and every day that it is delayed should be a day of hope, not a day of despair. For I do not agree with Macdonald that a third front of the people against all the militarists is out of the realm of historical possibility. To later observers it is only the movements which have succeeded that seem to have been historically possible, but it must be remembered that even these movements, in their very beginnings, must have seemed Quixotic hopes to the majority of the people who saw them. Up to 1917, the Bolsheviks were a tiny minority group of exiled plotters and underground labour agitators, and their ascension to power within a few months must have seemed extremely unlikely. The Congress movement of Gandhi started out of minute beginnings, and nothing could have been more pitifully inauspicious than the group of seven fanatics who gathered to form the Nationalist Socialist Party in the dim beginnings of Hitler's rise to power. What negative movements like Communism and Nazism have achieved from infinitesimal beginnings is surely not beyond the power of positive movements. And therefore I still maintain that a movement of the people that will carry through a formidable resistance to the threat of war, that will percolate through the weak points of the iron curtain — East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia — will only become impossible if there are no men to take the initiative, if there are no men with the imagination to conceive the right way to strike the thoughts and hearts of the world. There are those pessimists who contend that such a hope is Quixotic and that the day of movements of enthusiasm and faith is past. I would claim that in such times of crisis as our own we learn that the uncompromising rejection of negative forces — which our critics call Quixoticism — is in fact the only realistic hope of saving ourselves and our culture. And I would also suggest that there are plenty of signs to show that a time of this kind provides the very conditions in which a movement of faith and enthusiasm can take root. Already there are some such movements which have had an amazing

amount of limited success; Bhave's crusade for voluntary land redistribution in India is one example. A dynamic eleventh-hour anti-militarist movement that struck the imaginations of the world's peoples would be thoroughly compatible with the historical needs of our time, and it might run through the channels of our decaying civilisation as the forces of early Christianity burst out from the catacombs into the similarly moribund structure of imperial Rome. More than ever before, such a movement could change the whole character of human social existence.

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