

BOOK REVIEW

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Cushion, Steve
and Moos, Marilyn.

On Strike Against the Nazis

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ABSTRACT

We are warned at the outset of *On Strike Against the Nazis* that the two texts integrated in it are a contribution to adding class struggle to the historiography of the Second World War, which both authors consider too imbued with assumptions of patriotism and class collaboration in the analysis of the resistance to occupation.

KEYWORDS

Second World War
Occupation
Workers resistance

In the first text, Steve Cushion discusses the workers' mobilisations in the northern region of occupied France where, from 1941, in the mining region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, they reached other industries. The region in question, designated a Forbidden Zone by the German authorities, was administered by the military command in Brussels, and the French population that fled the German invasion was forbidden to return there. At the same time, Pétain's collaborationist government took control of the south of the country, and defended not only the interests of the German occupation, but also the advantages for the French bourgeoisie who established contracts and benefited from the occupying force.

In the north of France, and also in Belgium, the extraction of minerals was a priority for the supply policy of the Third Reich and the associated military industries were obviously part of the plans of the occupation and the development of the military offensive on Europe. In these plans, the Vichy government, the French and the Belgian bourgeoisie were diligent actors and, at the same time, great beneficiaries of the situation of occupation, repression, exploitation and extreme poverty of the working classes. Surely for this reason, the analysis of Steve Cushion and Marilyn Moos takes on special significance in the analytical framework of global history by recognising the determining role of class conflicts in the resistance to the Nazi occupation.

In Cushion's argument, the strikes in the mining regions in the north of France and Belgium, in addition to being driven by labour-related reasons, and in some cases having

achieved significant victories, directed a good part of the workers involved to integrate structures and organisations of resistance to the German occupation. The repression to which strikes and protest activities in the workplaces were subjected meant clandestinity was the only option in many cases. Emphasis is on the responsibilities of communist militants influential in these workers' mobilisations, and who were part of anti-Nazi resistance activities and structures before it became a policy assumed by their leadership. In fact, the upheaval provoked by the German-Soviet Pact in August 1939, in the field of the left and in particular of the communist militants in the face of politics in Western countries threatened with occupation or already occupied by German troops, is described in Cushion's text in detail.

At the base of the communist organisations there would be militant workers who confronted the occupying forces, the repression of the Vichy collaborative government, and a bourgeoisie that, with rare exceptions, adapted to and benefited from the occupation. The agreement between Hitler and Stalin did not prevent them from taking positions and organising multiple strategies of resistance, even when these were not determined by the party to which they belonged. In the dynamics of the class struggle, the agreements of the leaderships can be overtaken or even ignored by the struggle of the workers and their communities. On the other hand, it was the first invasion of the USSR by German troops, in June 1941, that finally brought together the leadership of the communist parties with the resistance practices of a significant part of their worker bases. In the two cases analysed, this was the moment when there was an increase in sabotage and urban guerrilla actions against German and French collaborating soldiers. Part of this resistance and sabotage was in a factory context in which the go-slow, or one-hour strikes alternating in the different mining sectors, became frequent, in a lexicon of forms of struggle capable of responding to situations of intense repression and complete illegality of the structures and organisations representing the workers.

Merilyn Moos' contribution, in the second part of the book, delves into the case of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), led by social democratic militants from Antwerp. The ITF organised illegal resistance groups from among German seafarers, dockers and railway workers. Its intense activity resulted in boycotts and huge disruptions throughout the North Sea in the circulation of raw materials to supply the German war industry, mainly between 1933 and 1945. This federation was also responsible for a huge movement of solidarity with the Spanish Republic, in what was the civil war that prepared the Second World War. As in the case of the labour and strike movement in the north of France and Belgium, some of the ITF militants also had experience in the international brigades that fought on the republican side. The ITF also invested considerable resources in this conflict, organised fighters, and prevented ships from following the supply route of the Francoist forces. Far from being an isolated case, the ITF's performance in the Spanish Civil War was a magnificent example of the practice of class solidarity in the face of the beginning of the conflict that swept Europe.

For the two authors, the Spanish Civil War was the beginning of a world conflict, to which only the workers' organisations wanted to respond, becoming a field of experience for many internationalist militants who there acquired the combat knowledge fundamental for the resistance to the occupation of later years. Invariably, the ranks of the resistance in occupied France and

Belgium were composed of many veterans of the International Brigades of the Spanish War.

On Strike Against the Nazis describes and organises information about the many struggle processes that took place before and during the Nazi occupation of France and Belgium, the internal debates within the workers' structures and the international left, and their meanings and strategic stalemate, but also the decisive influence in the post-war context and how it was the workers' strength, acquired in the effective resistance to the occupation, that prevented a greater US tutelage in the liberated countries.

Rigorously presenting the available data on each of these strikes, and their antecedents and contexts, Cushion and Moor's book also has people inside. They are the worker leaders of the various moments, ordinary people with extraordinary biographies that the book autonomises in the form of a tribute and as an enormous contribution to the text as a whole. They are the women of the mining communities in the marches for food and dignity, they are the Polish and Italian workers in the mines of the north of France, subject to the influence of the Communist Party, the Church, and the CGT. It was also the small Belgian Trotskyist group, with the Mandel family at its centre, that carried out intense propaganda activity with the German occupying forces in the region, according to Cushion, which was the clearest example of the combination of the economic class struggle with the armed anti-fascist resistance to the occupation. It was class solidarity that knew no races or creeds and that – clandestine, collective – always resisted ■