

C.L.R. JAMES

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY Christian Høgsbjerg

WORLD REVOLUTION 1917-1936

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL



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C. L. R. JAMES

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Cover art: Detail from a poster for a rally at which C. L. R.
James spoke in London in 1967, organized by the International
Socialists, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the
Russian Revolution. Artist unknown. Courtesy of Sean Wallis.

ABBREVIATIONS

ARAC	L'Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants (the Republican Association of War Veterans) (France)
CGTU	Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (United General Confederation of Labour) (France)
CI	Communist International
CP	Communist Party
CPG	Communist Party of Germany
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
GPU	Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoye Upravlenie/State Political Directorate (Soviet Union)
NEP	New Economic Policy
POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) (Spain)
PSOP	Parti Socialiste Ouvrier et Paysan (Workers' and Peasants' Socialist Party) (France)
TU	trade union
UNC	Union Nationale des Combattants (National Union of War Veterans) (France)
YCL	Young Communist League

EDITOR'S NOTE

For this edition of *World Revolution*, being published on the centenary of the Russian Revolution, one aim has been to preserve as much as possible of the essential, original text as it appeared in the 1937 edition, while making the volume accessible to a new generation of readers. For the sake of readability, we have therefore corrected the dozen or so typographical mistakes that crept into the original edition, and also where possible brought the spelling of individuals and place-names in line with modern scholarship and usage, so, for example, “Bucharin” is now “Bukharin.” Moreover, this edition (unlike the 1937 edition) uses numbered endnotes instead of footnotes and includes an index, which will hopefully aid readers. I have also added a list of abbreviations to define the acronyms that James uses. One necessary consequence of the changes made for this new edition, though, which should be noted at the outset, is that the pagination is different in this new edition from previous editions. This, regrettably, has meant that references to page numbers of the original edition in the text of *World Revolution* itself, and elsewhere—for example, in my introduction and in the contemporary reviews that are reproduced in this edition—no longer fit for this edition. To try to offset this and to avoid any potential confusion arising, I have placed the relevant new page numbers from this edition in brackets after references to earlier editions of the work throughout the text where necessary.

|||||

There are many people who helped in various ways when it came to researching James's *World Revolution* by providing me with some of the miscellaneous material that I include in this volume. My research here initially began in earnest while working on my doctoral thesis on James's life and work in the 1930s in the Department of History at the University of York. Many of

the people whom I thank in my acknowledgments in *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* (Duke University Press, 2014), the monograph that resulted from my thesis, deserve thanks again here. However, for the sake of space, I shall just take the opportunity to specifically thank Talat Ahmed, Logie Barrow, Ian Birchall, Paul Blackledge, Paul Buhle, Ted Crawford, Daniel Evans, David Featherstone, Paul Flowers, David Goodway, Christopher Hall, Ron Heisler, David Howell, Staffan Lindhé, Kevin Morgan, Fergus Nicol, the late Sidney Robinson, Sean Wallis, Sam Weinstein, Kent Worcester, and the late James D. Young. Reg Wicks kindly gave me permission to reproduce the two reviews of *World Revolution* by his father, Harry, while I am also grateful to Henry and Maureen Rothstein for their kind consent for me to republish the review by Andrew Rothstein.

An earlier, shorter version of my introduction first appeared as “‘A Kind of Bible of Trotskyism’: Reflections on C. L. R. James’s *World Revolution*” in *The C. L. R. James Journal* 19, nos. 1–2 (2013), and I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the editors of *The C. L. R. James Journal* for their assistance and support. My thanks also to the many librarians and archivists who assisted my research at various points, particularly at the British Library, the Glasgow Caledonian Archive of the Trotskyist Tradition, Hull History Centre, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (London), the Marx Memorial Library (London), the National Archives (Kew), the University of Leeds, the University of Stirling, the Alma Jordan Library (University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad), and the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. Special thanks are owed to Robert A. Hill, the literary executor of the C. L. R. James Estate, not only for his support for this project but also for his characteristically astute comments on my introduction, which improved it immeasurably, and expert editorial guidance throughout. I also owe a debt of thanks to the team at Duke University Press for their support for this project, and I would like to especially acknowledge the anonymous readers, as well as Gisela Fosado, Lydia Rose Rappoport-Hankins, Danielle Houtz, Christine Dahlin, Liz Smith, and Amy Ruth Buchanan. As is customary, I am responsible for the argument within my introduction and for any errors in the text.

| | | | |

As a coda, late in my research of *World Revolution* I finally acquired a rare copy of the original Secker and Warburg 1937 edition, which included personal handwritten inscriptions inside the front cover (“tom taylor. May 1937. Glasgow”) and the back cover (“From isobell on 27th april 1937 on twenty-

fifth birthday"). Thomas Johnston Taylor (1912–2001), who received *World Revolution* the month it was published as a birthday gift from Isobel Wands (whom he would marry six years later in 1943), had been born and educated in Glasgow. At age three, Taylor had lost his father, who was killed fighting in France in the First World War, which perhaps led to him becoming a socialist and pacifist. In 1931 Taylor won a scholarship to study in Germany, where he joined the German Young Socialists and witnessed the violent rise of Hitler's Nazis. Returning to Glasgow, Taylor worked closely with James Maxton of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). At age twenty-two in 1934, Taylor was elected for the ILP to Glasgow City Council as the city's youngest councillor. The handwritten markings throughout Taylor's edition of *World Revolution* are in themselves fascinating, as they not only show how carefully the work was read but perhaps also give a firsthand glimpse into the kind of revelatory impression that James's work must have made on a young socialist reading it in 1937. For example, Taylor has a little bookmark highlighting the importance of the "United Front" in the chapter relating to Hitler's rise to power, and there are handwritten notes in the text, regarding, for example, James's details of the then little-known "ghastly famine" during Stalin's collectivization in the early 1930s (page 304 of this edition) and James's argument that "there were in 1935 well over five million men in concentration camps in the Soviet Union" (395–96). Taylor's knowledge of the German language meant that in 1938 he was persuaded by the ILP to visit Vienna, Austria, and carry out heroic but dangerous work undercover, successfully helping antifascists escape as political refugees. A Quaker and socialist who registered as a conscientious objector during the Second World War, Taylor subsequently joined the Labour Party and went on to have an illustrious conventional career, being appointed to the House of Lords by the Labour Party as Lord Taylor of Gryfe in 1968.¹ But perhaps most remarkably, Taylor's copy of *World Revolution* included a loose newspaper clipping headed only "Stalin's Birthday Honours," dating presumably from around Stalin's sixtieth birthday on December 22, 1939, and it seems to me fitting to reproduce this newspaper clipping here. There is no need for further comment—in a sense, the clipping speaks for itself—but that Taylor chose to preserve it inside *World Revolution* stands in its way as a fine testament to the essential truth of the argument underpinning James's work.

STALIN'S BIRTHDAY HONOURS

The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, to mark Stalin's birthday, conferred on him the title of "Hero of Socialist Labour."

Stalin is also to receive the "Order of Lenin" for "exceptional services in organising the Bolshevik party, in creating the Soviet State, in building up Socialist society in the USSR, and in consolidating the friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union."

Herr Hitler sent a telegram to Stalin in which he said: "I combine my best wishes for your personal prosperity and for a happy future for the peoples of the USSR and their friends."

Praise for Stalin's "foresight" in pursuing a new foreign policy of friendship for Germany, "thus defeating the encirclement plans of the Western Powers," was the theme of German press comments on the birthday.

Note

1. See Tam Dalyell, "Thomas Johnston Taylor—Lord Taylor of Gryfe, 27 April 1912–13 July 2001," *Independent*, July 17, 2001. Thomas Taylor contributed several articles to the ILP paper the *New Leader* during the 1930s. See, for example, Tom Taylor, "Labour's Rule in Glasgow," *New Leader*, August 27, 1937, and Tom Taylor, "After Austria, What?," *New Leader*, August 12, 1938.

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In November 1967, the black Trinidadian Marxist historian C. L. R. James attended a rally at Mahatma Gandhi Hall in London to speak about “The Unfinished Revolution: 50 Years since the Great Russian Revolution,” alongside Harry Wicks, a veteran British Trotskyist who had been a member of the British Communist Party in the 1920s, the Irish radical Gerry Lawless, and the Palestinian-born Marxist Tony Cliff, the leading figure in the International Socialists (IS).¹ One of those who heard James speak that month at another meeting organized to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, this time at Ruskin College, Oxford, was Christopher Hitchens, then a young IS member active in the Movement for Colonial Freedom. Hitchens later recalled that James “chose to speak on Vietnam, putting it squarely in the context of imperialism and the resistance to it, and his wonderfully sonorous voice was as enthralling to me as his very striking carriage and appearance.” “He was getting on by then, but the nimbus of white hair only accentuated his hollow-cheeked, almost anthracite face . . . for me a little crackle of current was provided by the reflection that here stood a man who had, in real time . . . associated with Trotsky . . . [and] anti-colonial revolution, and . . . the very early stirrings of the American civil rights movement.”²

Regarding the Vietnam War, by the fall of 1967 Hitchens noted “the fantastic web of official lying and bluff about the war had already been torn irreparably apart.”

James did not waste any phrases on the revelations of atrocities that were beginning to disturb even cold war liberals. He was a historian of imperialism, and he knew all he needed to know about free-fire zones and strategic hamlets. He understood them by analogy, from his rigorous study of the French in Haiti, the Spanish in Cuba, the British in South Africa and

Monday 6th November
7.30pm
Mahatma Gandhi Hall
Fitzroy Square
nearest tube Warren St

CLR James
Gerry Lawless
Harry Wicks
Tony Cliff

50 years since the Great Russian Revolution

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION



Poster for a rally in London in 1967, organized by the International Socialists, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Artist unknown. Courtesy of Sean Wallis.

the Italians in Ethiopia. Such conduct toward lesser peoples scarcely rated a raising of the voice. What was impressive about the Vietnamese, he said coolly, was the proven fact that they wouldn't put up with it any longer, and had taken the decision to endure anything. This was how history was made.

Listening to James—the author of, among other works, the classic history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938)—speak on the Russian Revolution and its relevance fifty years on was such an inspiration, Hitchens recalled, that he “first began to think that utopianism was too feeble and colourless a term for those few who have the courage to talk of a future we cannot yet fully imagine.”³

At the London rally, while speaking about the Russian Revolution and its legacy alongside Harry Wicks, James's mind could not have helped but have been cast back to the struggles waged by the tiny early British Trotskyist movement during the tumultuous 1930s.⁴ James, a recent recruit to that movement, having joined in spring 1934, had been helped by figures like Wicks write the work that would see the writer from colonial Trinidad emerge as one of the intellectual driving forces of British Trotskyism: *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*.⁵ Published by Secker and Warburg in April 1937, James's *World Revolution* stands as a remarkable and in many ways pathbreaking contribution to Marxist literature, one of the very first histories ever written of the Communist International (Comintern).

World Revolution was all the more remarkable for having been written by James in less than a year. That he had managed to undertake the necessary research and writing in such a short space of time, and to produce a work displaying such mastery of the material, meant a lot to James himself. After completing the book, James would later recall, a recurring nightmare of his since he was a schoolboy in Trinidad—“the report would come. It would say that I was not trying. My father would be very angry and I would be upset for days”—finally left him for good.⁶ In a speech given in 1983, James proudly recalled how in writing the book he had “applied the Marxist method to the world as a whole.”

There was Britain, there was France, there was China, there was Russia, but there was not much about Africa because in those days I had come from the Caribbean and was concerned to learn all that I could about historical method. Any historical method dealt with the world at large. That

I had to do and I did it. I think I did it pretty well because when I came to tackle the Caribbean history, the history of the Haitian revolution . . . many of the things I learned to write [in] *World Revolution* still remain with me.⁷

The Historical Idea of World Revolution

The idea of “world revolution” is, historically, a comparatively modern one, originating with that great “citizen of the world” Thomas Paine, who on November 4, 1791, in London gave a toast to “The Revolution of the World.”⁸ Paine’s toast came fittingly amid perhaps one of the most remarkable moments of internationalism in the age of bourgeois-democratic revolution, when in the aftermath of the great French Revolution of 1789—itsself inspired by the American Revolution of 1776—black enslaved peoples in the prized French Caribbean slave colony of Saint-Domingue began their own uprising in August 1791. The young Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were alive during the next great moment of international revolution, when democratic revolution in France in 1830 once again inspired young radicals across Europe, and even the rulers of the British state felt threatened enough by the potential for revolution from below in this period to enact the Great Reform Act of 1832. In 1847, Marx and Engels would become members of the Communist League, an organization for which they famously penned their classic *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The old motto of the Communist League was changed from “All Men are Brothers” to “Proletarians of all Countries, Unite!”⁹

The Communist Manifesto was published just before the outbreak of the next great wave of international democratic revolutions that broke out across Europe in 1848, a struggle into which Marx and Engels threw themselves before ultimately being forced into exile in Britain amid the state repression that accompanied the victory of counterrevolutionary forces. In 1850, generalizing from the historic experience of 1848 as a revolutionary process across Europe, particularly the June 1848 rising of workers in Paris, which so shocked and terrified once-revolutionary French middle-class radicals, Marx and Engels distilled an important new lesson regarding the necessity for independent working-class politics and political organization in the struggle for socialism and democracy, exemplified in the formation of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA)—the “First International”—in 1864, in which Marx himself played a critical role. After the First Interna-

tional effectively succumbed to factionalism after the repression of the Paris Commune of 1871, the Second International was formed in Paris in July 1889 (the centenary of the outbreak of the French Revolution).

At the close of his “inaugural address” to the IWMA, Marx had praised recent concrete examples of workers’ internationalism, including “the heroic resistance” by “the working classes of England” to the “criminal folly” of their rulers, whose natural sympathies inclined them toward intervening on the side of the slave-owning South during the American Civil War. Despite the fact that Lancashire cotton textile workers might have materially benefited in the short term from lining up behind the cotton textile “lords of capital” on this question, instead of supporting British imperialism they waged a tremendous mass agitation in the early 1860s in support of the North, which, according to Marx, “saved the rest of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.” Marx stressed the importance of workers challenging the “criminal designs” of their own capitalist class “playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people’s blood and treasure.”¹⁰

C. L. R. James and Revolutionary Marxism in 1930s Britain

This is not the place to recount and detail James’s political and intellectual evolution toward Marxism after making the “voyage in” from colonial Trinidad to imperial Britain in 1932 at the time of the Great Depression and witnessing the concomitant dangerous rise of fascism amid mass unemployment across continental Europe. Suffice it to say that as a teenager growing up in Trinidad C. L. R. James had heard talk of the danger of “Bolshevism” spreading to the island following a mass strike sparked by dockworkers in the capital of Port of Spain in 1919.¹¹ Soon after arriving in London in 1932 James would write a short story for the *Port of Spain Gazette* about a young colonial intellectual who journeys to London and then rebels at the gap between his expectations of the imperial metropole as the center of a great civilization and the harsh reality of mass unemployment and poverty in the city: “He now wears a red tie, has contributed to the *Daily Worker*, and the latest heard of him is that he contemplates speaking in Hyde Park on the evils of British Colonial Government.”¹²

Why James did not himself ultimately follow the path of his protagonist in his 1932 story and end up supporting the Communist Party of Great

Britain (CPGB), but instead chose to become a Trotskyist, owed something to his decision to leave London only three months after first arriving in Britain. He would spend ten critical months with the family of his friend and compatriot, the great West Indian cricketer Learie Constantine, in Nelson, Lancashire. In Nelson, James saw socialist traditions of solidarity emerge in the face of austerity, and a collectivist spirit embodied among a militant working-class community of cotton textile weavers taking mass strike action in September 1932; he was also able to satisfy a growing interest in wishing to understand the events of the Russian Revolution after he came across the first volume of Leon Trotsky's newly published *History of the Russian Revolution*.¹³ Then, in London in the summer of 1933, after devouring all three volumes of Trotsky's *History*, James felt inspired to undertake a close study of Marxism and the Russian Revolution. After reading Trotsky, the "prophet outcast"¹⁴ now in exile from the land of the October Revolution, James recalled that "it was then necessary to read the relevant volumes of Stalin. And, of course, I had to read Lenin in order to trace back the quarrel. And thereby I reached volume one of *Das Kapital* and *The 18th Brumaire* of Marx himself. . . . I realised the Stalinists were the greatest liars and corrupters of history there ever were. No one convinced me of this. I convinced myself. But having come to this conclusion, I wanted to meet some Trotskyists."¹⁵

Given the minuscule size of the Trotskyist movement—in Britain the first Trotskyist grouping, the Communist League, was formed when the twelve strong "Balham Group" of veteran CPGB members in South West London around figures like Reg Groves, Harry Wicks, and Hugo Dewar was expelled in 1932—it was no simple task. By the time James finally came across organized Trotskyists in Britain in spring 1934—after his return from a research trip to France—the Communist League had already split, and James found himself joining the minority led by Denzil Dean Harber who had been willing to follow Trotsky's tactical advice to join and "enter" the Independent Labour Party (ILP).¹⁶ The ILP had deep historic roots in the British working-class movement, particularly in regions such as the north of England and Scotland—and with over 16,000 members was about five times the size of the small but slowly growing CPGB. It had broken away from Labour in 1932 in what Gidon Cohen notes was "the most important Left wing split in the history of the Labour Party."¹⁷

Living in Hampstead in London at this point, James would meet up with his new Trotskyist comrades at meetings held locally in the home of the distinguished scientist Dr. Izrael Heiger and his partner, Esther. This little group