

Max Shachtman and his left

Barry Finger reviews "Max Shachtman and his left: a socialist's odyssey through the 'American Century'", Peter Drucker, Humanities Press, 1994.

IN THE LATE 1960s, the New York branch of the International Socialists, the direct political descendant and heir apparent to the Third Camp traditions of the Workers' Party (1940-49) and Independent Socialist League (1949-58), whose main leader had been Max Shachtman, issued an indignant denial to the "crude distortions and outright misrepresentations" of the Cannonite Young Socialist Alliance. Foremost among the misconceptions which the IS was at pains to dispel was the characterisation of the IS as "Shachtmanite":

"A class line is drawn," they charged, "between us and the Shachtmanites. A few concrete examples: unlike the Shachtmanites, our tendency (a) opposed the Bay of Pigs invasion (or Cuba, by the US-backed rightwingers, 1961); (b) calls for immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and has done so for at least five years; (c) supported the black community in the New York City teachers' strike; (d) supports rank-and-file struggles in the trade unions; (e) defends the new movements against the repression. If our paper claimed that Jim Cannon was a Stalinist because he was once in the same Comintern as Stalin, you would be torn between outrage and amusement. To link our tendency politically to the Shachtmanites is to make the same kind of amalgam, and we are not amused."

Ironically, while repudiating Shachtman, without whose previous 30 year legacy there would quite simply have been no IS, the organisation's common revolutionary ancestry with the Cannonites — an ancestry long stripped of any operative significance or meaningful contemporary political reference — was emphatically, even enthusiastically, reaffirmed.

Yet, in a very real sense this, paradox speaks volumes to the tragic renegacy of Shachtman in the final phase of his life, from the late 1950s — when he successfully agitated to dissolve his organisation into the long moribund Socialist Party — to his death in 1972. Of the inner political life of this later Shachtman, we know — paradoxically — virtually nothing. His thought processes were no longer committed to paper; his opinions were confined only to an inner-circle. Writer's block was the psychological price the later Shachtman paid for the repudiation of a lifetime of revolutionary commitment. Yet it is precisely this commitment, a contribu-

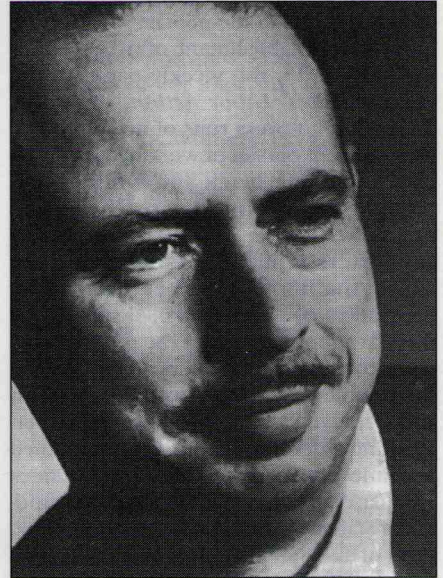
tion virtually without parallel within his generation, that merits this long overdue evaluation of this singular personality and the extraordinary movement which he nourished.

It is the political significance of this other Shachtman which Peter Drucker recognises and to whom he pays a critical, yet well-deserved tribute.

Shachtman entered the socialist movement in 1921 at the age of 17, his formative experiences decisively shaped by the Russian Revolution, whose ramified course and fate virtually engulfed all political events for the ensuing half-century and more. In the mid-20s he became an editor of the *Young Worker*, a frequent contributor to the *Daily Worker* and the *Liberator*, was an alternate to the Central Committee of the CP and one of its delegates to the 1925 and '27 Conferences of the Third International. Seven years after entering the ranks of the movement, Shachtman was expelled — branded a Trotskyist for having circulated Trotsky's suppressed, *The Third International After Lenin*, smuggled out of Russia by Cannon. Within the next 15 years, Shachtman was to play a central role in affiliating over twenty-five national sections to the Fourth International and was to forge its theoretical journal, *The New Internationalist*, into a powerful weapon of political analysis and agitation. He tirelessly translated, edited and inscribed forewords to dozens of Trotsky's works and was ultimately to remain literary executor of the Old Man's estate, despite having broken from the Cannonites.

What earned Shachtman his place in the history of revolutionary ideas? To defend the 1917 socialist experiment in revolutionary democracy, (without either deifying its leaders or justifying its every deed) and to salvage its heritage and inspiration from the corruption of Stalinism, Shachtman and his comrades were driven to continuously extend their analysis beyond the rapidly ossifying confines of "orthodox" Trotskyism. Stalinism, they argued, was not merely a corrupt outgrowth of an otherwise intact workers' state, but a constitutive component of a new counter-revolutionary social system built over the gravesite of the Russian revolution. This "bureaucratic collectivism" was the result of the autonomisation of state power, the transformation of the state bureaucracy into an independent and uncontrolled class formation. They, like the classical ruling classes of Oriental Despotism, exercised control over the means of production not by right of private property, but collectively through their amassing of an unchallengeable state monopoly over the levers of economic, political and social power.

The Workers' Party was guided by



Max Shachtman

Lenin's dictum that "whoever wants to approach socialism by any means other than political democracy will inevitably arrive at absurd and reactionary conclusions." The inseparability of socialism and democracy was the distinctive hallmark of independent socialism. The WP-ISL viewed the world of their day as a three cornered struggle between two ruling classes — capitalist and bureaucratic collectivist — which continuously threatened humanity with extinction, and a third camp, consisting of the working class and the oppressed masses who are its natural allies. The power of this latent revolutionary-democratic movement from below lies as yet dormant until, roused by the defence of its own vital interests, it is driven into irreconcilable opposition to the two ruling classes.

Whatever their self-conception, either as a mass party in formation or as a ginger-group at the left wing of the labour, civil rights and peace movements, the Shachtmanites not only refused to extend an "unconditional defence of the Soviet Union", but sharpened and honed their analysis in revolutionary opposition to all sides during World War II; they were the only socialist grouping in America to have done so. They mercilessly exposed the war against fascism as a vehicle that would advance totalitarianism on a world scale, leaving the world to be policed by the new victors on an imperialist basis while enfeebling and corrupting the workers' organisations in the bourgeois democracies through their intensified self-negation as tools useful to any social purpose beyond the pursuit of victory.

While the SWPers were hunkering down to "preserve the cadre" by keeping quiet in the unions and elsewhere, the WP used