



Workers' Liberty

Reason in revolt

Vol 3 No 65 December 2018 Published with Solidarity 489

£1 if sold separately

The Best Little Gin-Joint West Of The Pecos

The politics of 'Casablanca'



The politics of Casablanca

By Sean Matgamna

Casablanca may be the most popular Hollywood movie ever made. It is at the centre of a big cult, and part of another big cult, that of its star, Humphrey Bogart.

It is a highly-burnished fable, or set of fables, about how good (though at first politically disoriented), not so good, and thoroughly bad people finally rally to “the fight against fascism” as embodied in the Allied, specifically the American, cause in World War Two.

Perhaps its popularity is in part because Casablanca is a feel-good, even a cosy, film. With pretensions. And it is tremendously well-made.

It touches on serious concerns, without pain-bearing seriousness, and in a sense without real concern. It softens, sweetens, romanticises, misrepresents and tries to hide or smother in moonshine and romanticism, every issue it touches upon.

It glamorises: the Resistance meet each other in a high society nightclub. The Nazi Germans in it aren’t Nazis as that term would have meaning by 1945, and has meaning now.

It is a “pre-fascist” film, innocent of the knowledge of the horror-Nazism that would soon appear. It has no definition of fascism.

It is perhaps appropriate that in a central scene, where German soldiers are drowned out by singing of their Marseillaise, the Germans are not singing the Nazi anthem, the Horst Wessel Lied, but a 19th-century German nationalist song, Watch on the Rhine. Germans are not “Nazis”. Yet.

The ideas that the term “Nazi” conjures up for us today hadn’t emerged yet. In broad public opinion, there was no great horror yet. Charlie Chaplin once said that his 1940 film *The Great Dictator*, which poked fun at Hitler, would not have been possible to conceive of later in the war after the “Nazi” aspects of German fascism had been revealed.

When Casablanca was made, it was still the age of comparative innocence about the realities of Nazism.

The fascists aren’t very fascistic — not Nazis, as that word would connote afterwards. They are still comfortable villains, not monsters. The film is as cosy as a well-run nightclub in the desert. The worst villain comes over from the dark side at the end.

On refugees, the film doesn’t soften the reality – it turns it on its head.

The heroes are designated, though for the first half of the film the behaviour of the central character is not heroic and is at times reprehensible. For heroes and villain(s), what they are is ascribed.

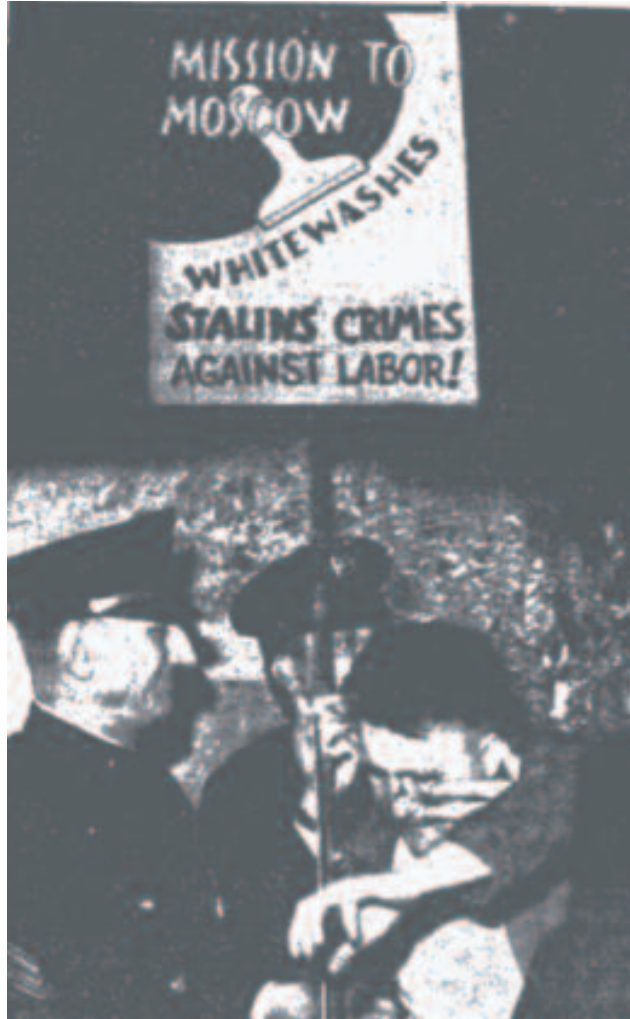
Casablanca is about sexual love. It is saturated with it, from the lighting of the actors to the theme song, which counterpoints (under the censorship against sexuality then ruling) what we are allowed to see on screen. It is about sex. Casablanca is almost modern in that respect.

That is set out at the beginning, when we are shown a decidedly phallic tower. Shots of that tower and its urgently flashing lights will be repeated at key points in the story. Casablanca unfolds under the sign and symbol of the phallic tower.

A lot has been written about the exigencies in the making of Casablanca — no full script at the start, the constraints of the censorship, etc. — in effect deconstructing it. It exists as a finished and coherent and politically functional film. I will deal with that, and its politics.

It is not possible to prove any particular reading or interpretation of Casablanca. To try to would be as silly as trying to define it as a complete and coherent parody of the parallel realities it parodies. You can only offer an account, an interpretation, of it.

You can take it as only hokum, or seriously, on its own terms and by the role it played as war propaganda, and, now,



An American Trotskyist bloodied after being attacked by Stalinists when he picketed outside a showing of Mission to Moscow

as romantic master work. Take it as hokum and the question is still there: is it benign hokum?

It played a role as war propaganda. It offers an account of the world to its audiences. It does that still. In how it dealt with one of the great questions in the 1930s and 1940s world, the refugee question, it contributed to how people then saw and dealt with it.

It is an ideological relic of its time and place and of the way that world saw and dealt with the questions which Casablanca in its own way dealt with. In that, Casablanca opens for us an unexpected window into the world in which the Holocaust could happen, and in which America and other countries refused to let in Jews threatened with death and eventually killed.

CASABLANCA AND MISSION TO MOSCOW

Casablanca was one of the first of a series of American war propaganda films, some of which would glorify Stalin’s Russia. Howard Koch, one of the three credited writers on Casablanca, and a Stalinist, is said to have put the politics into the film.

The film’s director, Michael Curtiz would go on, in his next assignment for the same studio, Warner Brothers, to make one of the greatest political atrocities in Hollywood’s atrocity-rich history: *Mission to Moscow*. Koch was its sole writer.

Made at the suggestion of President F D Roosevelt, it was an out-and-out endorsement of the Stalin regime in Russia and of Stalin’s Moscow show-trials (1936, 1937, 1938). The former US ambassador to Moscow appeared on screen at the start of the film to vouch for its truth. The film had something

like the stamp of Roosevelt administration endorsement.

Casablanca and *Mission to Moscow* are twins — not identical twins, but twins nonetheless. They tell the same general story. Both give the Stalinist account of world politics in the lead-up to the Stalin-Hitler Pact and the outbreak of war in August-September 1939. For the most part Casablanca does it subtly; *Mission to Moscow*, brutally.

The easiest way to show the reader what *Mission to Moscow* was is to cite what the friendly New York Times critic said of it:

“*Mission to Moscow* as a film — or should we say as a screen manifesto, which is actually what it is... is clearly the most outspoken picture on a political subject that an American studio has ever made. With a boldness unique in film ventures, which usually evade all issues, it comes out sharply and frankly for an understanding of Russia’s point of view.

“It says... that Russia’s leaders saw, when the leaders of other nations dawdled, that the Nazis were a menace to the world... Particularly will it anger the so-called Trotskyites with its visual re-enactment of the famous ‘Moscow trials’. For it puts into the record for millions of movie-goers to grasp an admission that the many ‘purged’ generals and other leaders were conspirators in a plot — a plot engineered by Trotsky with the Nazis and the Japs to drain the strength of Russia and make it an easy victim for conquest.

“It (says that) Russia, far from earlier suspicion, is a true and most reliable ally” — Bosley Crowther, 30 April 1943.

Casablanca is a product of the interplay during World War Two of bourgeois-democratic capitalism and Russian Stalinism and its world wide support network: bourgeois democrat meets Stalinist pretending to be bourgeois democrat.

In *Mission to Moscow* we see on the screen things that are only referred to as great events in Casablanca. For instance, in Casablanca we are told that Rick Blaine ran guns to an Ethiopia fighting Italian fascist invaders. In *Mission to Moscow* we see the Emperor of Ethiopia (an obvious white actor in black make-up), whose country has been overrun by Italy, appeal in vain to the League of Nations.

Casablanca justifies US involvement in the war to hitherto isolationist Americans. *Mission to Moscow* helped make the alliance with yesterday’s, and tomorrow’s, godless communist tyrant, Stalin, acceptable to politically naive, patriotic and unknowing Americans.

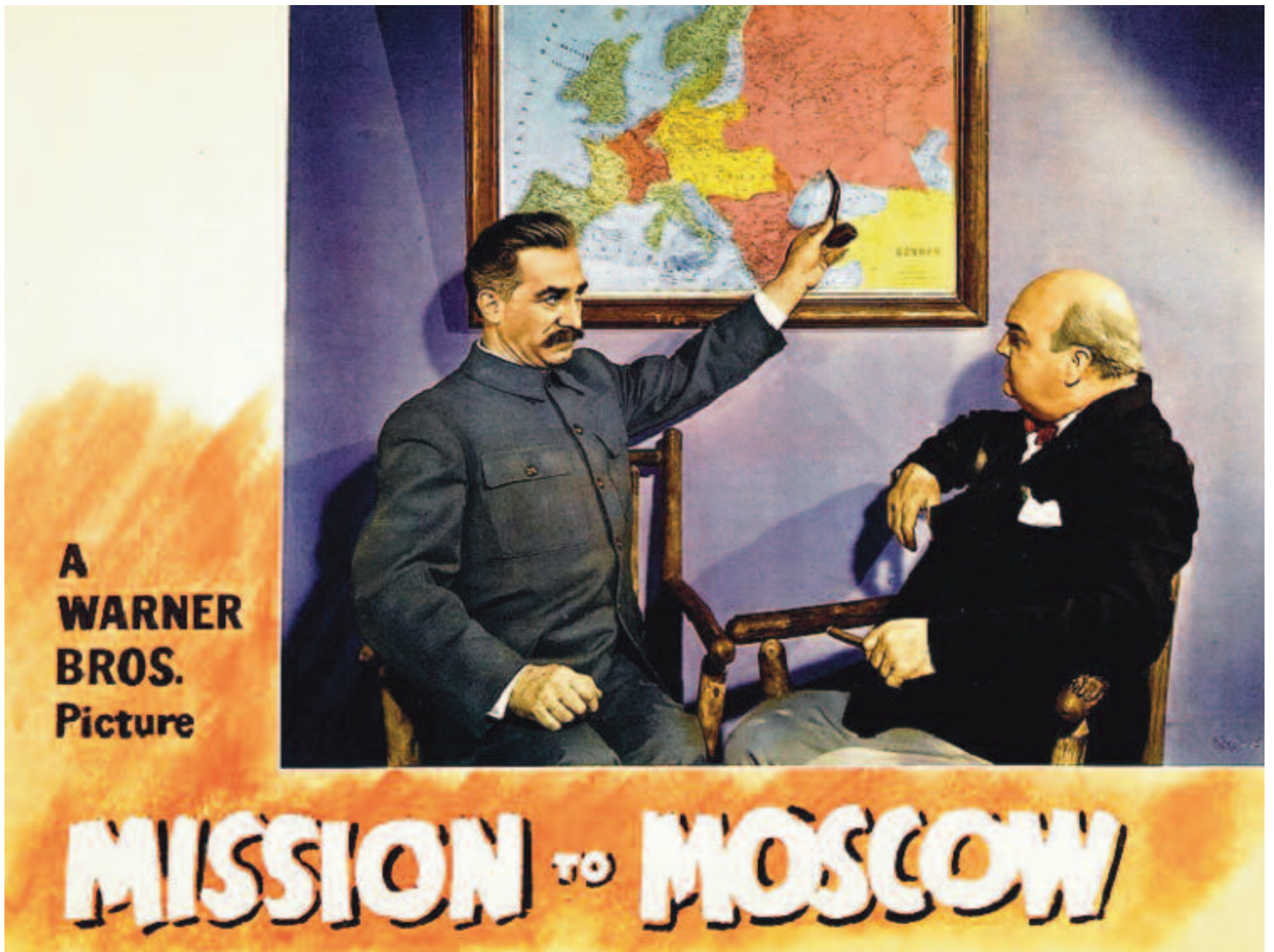
Casablanca alludes to things and names in the real world. In its own fictional version of those things it is intended to affect that world. Here, political events, and possible political motives for political events, are translated into personal and biographical terms.

America’s leading philosopher, John Dewey, who had headed an independent inquiry into the Moscow Trials, denounced *Mission to Moscow* as totalitarian propaganda. It was, straight, blunt and brutal.

Casablanca was that too, in a more subtle way. One of its most-quoted lines — “the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world” — expresses, when put like that in a world of totalitarian and militarised states and widespread state-worship, a fascistic and a Stalinist idea of the relationship of people to the state.

Up front, Casablanca is a polemical dialogue with those Americans — 70% in one late 1941 poll — who opposed US involvement in the World War. President Roosevelt won his third term in November 1940 on a pledge that he would keep America out of war. (Like Woodrow Wilson in 1916, who once re-elected took America into the war in 1917). Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) is their stand-in. But Casablanca is more than that.

It filters the case against American isolationism through the Stalinist account, as of late 1941, of the political history of the 1930s. It retells it in and as the biographies of Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), Louis Renault (Claude Rains), Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), and, in-



The director and main writer of Casablanca made, as their next film, Mission to Moscow — a film whitewashing Stalin and the Moscow Trials

directly, of Sam, the pianist (Sam has no second name: Dooley Wilson).

Blaine's is the central biography. His story before he got to Casablanca is the biography of a typical Stalinist, or CP fellow-traveller, of the second half of the 1930s. So, less clearly, are those of the "anti-Fascist" hero, Victor Laszlo, and of Ilsa, his wife.

The Stalinist movement was an immense cultural and intellectual power in the world in which Casablanca was made. Often they could set the terms of debates and the framework of discussions.

In Britain (and in other leading countries they were often stronger), the Stalinists had a daily paper (after 1930), journals, a publishing house, a (folk) record-publishing company, and many other outlets. The civil rights organisation Liberty, which for decades was called the National Council for Civil Liberties, was started by the CP in the mid 1930s, when the CPs abolished the working-class international labour defence organisations and turned to the Popular Front.

As it is impossible to understand Western art and literature without knowing the Old and New Testaments at least on the level of stories, so too it is difficult to understand 20th century art and literature without knowing something of the history of the Communist International, its parties, its political "lines" and zigzags.

It is well known that nursery rhymes and children's songs), understood now as little nonsense stories, once had serious meaning and resonances that were forgotten over the years

and fell out of awareness. For instance:

"Ring-a-ring o' roses" was about the plague that once came annually to the towns and cities of Europe, killing many people.

Or:

"Hark! Hark!
The dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town
Some in rags and some in jags
And one in a velvet gown".

That was a mocking comment on those who, when the English monarchy was restored in 1660, came out of silence or hiding to claim reward for what – they said – they had suffered under Cromwell for their loyalty to the deposed Stuart kings.

Similar processes fill language with piled-up dead metaphors — taking words which were living references, comparisons, evocations and parallels, and which gained meaning and force by evoking those things, and over time turning them into words which now have meaning but no easily-intelligible references to other things. Dead metaphors. So, too, with Casablanca.

Casablanca is riddled with half-buried political ideas that were once intelligible to a large number of those who saw the film — with scrambled, half-hidden, misnamed, disguised political analogies, subtexts, parallels, metaphors.

It is a history of a section of the ostensible left. And it is itself part of that history. To make proper sense of it, its original sense, it has to be put back inside that time and that political framework.

THE STORY

Casablanca opens with a song, made in 1931, reminding the audience that a kiss is still a kiss, and a sigh just a sigh. It deals with sex within the bounds of the very strict censorship against sex in Hollywood movies.

We are in Casablanca, capital city of Morocco, a French colony in North Africa where an armed revolt against the French had been fought in the 1920s. France has been defeated by Germany, one third of it occupied. The government of unoccupied France, "Vichy France" (its capital is in the spa town of Vichy), still runs the French colonial empire.

This France is controlled by the French Right — royalists; political Catholics; patriotic, anti-German, French fascists; people who think the Revolution (1789-94) was a mistake and a crime; anti-Semites, who round up French Jews and deliver them to the Gestapo, and the death camps. Vichy France is a quasi-fascist, Catholic-authoritarian State.

This Casablanca is a place of refugees. A voice-over at the start sets the scene:

"With the coming of the Second World War many eyes in Europe turned, hopefully and desperately, to the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point, but not everyone could get to Lisbon directly.



Casablanca is a film about refugees in early World War 2 — but without any Jewish refugees

“Tortuous roundabout refugee trails sprang up. Paris to Marseilles, across the Mediterranean to Oran. Then by train, auto or foot across the rim of Africa to Casablanca, in French Morocco. Here the fortunate ones through money or influence or luck might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to the New World. But the others wait in Casablanca, and wait and wait and wait.” We see newsreel shots of refugees hordes on “the refugee trail”. After those newsreel shots we see no hardship-case refugees, only prosperous habitués of night-clubs and casinos.

In reality this is a world with a murderous dearth of entry visas. Since 1924 immigration to the USA has been limited to a small and tight quota system — 2% of the number of people of the given background who were in the USA in 1890. All the doors are bolted shut to refugees, double and triple bolted against Jews (the quota system was avowedly designed to keep Jews out, and large-scale Jewish immigration had come after 1890).

The film’s refugees are strange refugees, inverted refugees. Their problem is not the common problem of refugees everywhere, getting somewhere, the USA for instance, to let them in. It is exit visas from Casablanca they can’t get.

This Casablanca is directly controlled by the Vichy Prefect of Police, Louis Renault (Claude Rains). Here, people are killed for their “papers”, visas, “letters of transit”. The police murder people in custody, either deliberately or while attempting to beat information out of them. The cynical, candid Prefect gloats of one such death that he has not yet decided whether the prisoner “committed suicide” or “died trying to escape”.

An expatriate American, Rick Blaine, runs “Rick’s Café Américain”, a nightclub and a crooked casino, the centre of upper-crust social life in Casablanca; of upper-crust refugee life too. Everybody comes to Rick’s, you might say (and the never-produced stage play on which it was based did say in its title).

People of all nationalities can be found at Rick’s. Here people mix who in the wider world are killing each other on sight. Louis Renault, German officers, like Major Strasser, a “crazy Russian” bartender, as Mr Rick affectionately refers to his bar worker. A couple of black people are among the patrons, and one or two may be Chinese.

In this in-gathering Casablanca, there is even a British couple, posh in speech, manner, voice and clothes, the man wearing a monocle. (What are they doing there in December 1941?) Stranded in Casablanca are French, Central European and other refugees from the Nazis, all seeking exit visas to travel to Portugal, and, beyond that, to the USA. There is one who may be a fugitive from American justice, and another

who, we will understand, is a refugee from the USA.

Casablanca’s last scene is set on 7 December 1941, the day of the Japanese attack on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbour.

But this Casablanca is in a different time zone from the rest of the world. The USA is still letting in everybody who wants to come. No one in Casablanca has a problem with entry visas.

Rick’s Café Américain is the world writ small. But not all the world. There are surprising absences. The great “refugee problem” is that of the Jews of Europe, who have nowhere else to go, and millions of whom will be slaughtered who would have lived if other countries had let them in. There are no Jews in Casablanca. Jews are not shown or mentioned directly at all.

And though Casablanca is in Morocco, there are no Moroccan characters in the film either. Blaine’s club owner rival seems to be Moroccan — he wears a fez in one scene — but he speaks like an educated Englishman and is called Mr Ferrari.

MR RICK

Rick Blaine possesses great power in Casablanca. He is the social lion. He sits alone in his club playing chess with himself, nodding this one in and the other one out of his domain, a parody of an immigration official. Himself a refugee who had to flee France, somehow he has become a king among the refugees.

In fact, this Casablanca is a place already well known in Hollywood westerns, a staple of American cowboy films (and of western novels and boys’ comics of that time) — the town “West of the Pecos”, or wherever, in which “the law does not run” and outlaws gather. It is almost a surprise that we don’t see Wanted posters on the walls offering rewards. In this film there is no extradition between Vichy France and Germany. (In fact there was.) Here, West of the Pecos, the outlaw is safe from the law. Then we hear that Rick, who has travelled “the refugee trail”, is “wanted”, that he “has a price on his head”. He is an “outlaw”, running from the police (exactly why is never made plain).

Everything in the early part of the film goes to build up “Mr Rick”. All hold him in respect, and some in awe. All want his approval and good opinion. When policeman Louis meets the German Major Strasser (Conrad Veigt) off a plane, it is Rick they talk about as they walk to the aerodrome. (Strasser: yes, I’ve heard of this Rick) Strasser carries a dossier on him.

Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), the world renowned anti-fascist leader, has also heard of Mr Rick in Casablanca. When his wife, Ilsa, asks who Rick is, Rick’s friend Louis, the top cop in Casablanca, tells new-comers Laszlo and Ilsa: “He is

the kind of man who — if I were a woman, and if I weren’t around — I should be in love with Rick”.

Mr Rick is a one-time “anti-fascist”, now dormant. He says he fought against clerical-fascism in Spain and their German and Italian helpers there. But now his best friend is the local colonial top cop for the clerical near-fascist rulers of France.

In 1935 Rick had run guns to an Ethiopia fighting fascist Italian invaders, and was positively for Abyssinia’s right to freedom from conquest. He is now indifferent to Morocco, whose cause had been championed by anti-imperialists in the 1920s, especially in France.

Rick is, we hear, a “man of mystery”. He is, he himself says, on a “Nazi blacklist”. “Their roll of honour”.

We will learn that Mr Rick is a bit of a bullshit artist. The old Rick Blaine, if he is telling truth about himself, is long gone when the film starts. Now he is just another self-worshipping, self-serving small bourgeois. He calls himself a “saloon keeper”.

Blaine needs this build-up. He is a battered, troubled, damaged human being, who, from what we see of him in the first half of the film, is not at all admirable. Psychologically, Mr Rick is a mess, both an “idealist” who will be reignited, and someone who yet boasts to Louis the cop that he got “well paid” for his activity in Ethiopia and Spain...

Russia did well out of Spain. All the government gold in Madrid was shipped to Moscow. The volunteer soldiers of the International Brigade, however, were not especially well paid, and they were not mercenaries. Mr Rick is lying to impress his friend, Louis the cop. The anti-fascist film casually demeans those who fought and died fighting fascism in Spain.

THE MAGIC CARPET

A people trafficker, Mr Ugarte — Peter Lorre — steals “letters of transit”, killing the two German couriers carrying them. He acted for Laszlo and his friends, or with Laszlo in mind. Laszlo expects to find him in Casablanca.

Ugarte boasts to Mr Rick about it and entrusts the letters to him, as much to impress him as for safe-keeping. He is then caught and killed by the Vichy police. The letters, carried by German couriers though signed by General De Gaulle, leader of the anti-German and anti-Vichy “Free French”, are Rick’s, to do with as he likes.

The idea of all-empowering letters of transit is a bureaucratic power fantasy. In a bureaucracy-gripped world, it is the dream of super-bureaucratic power — a document that trumps all others. Louis tells Rick that the letters “cannot be rescinded”.

Nothing like that ever existed. It is in the same order of things as a flying carpet — a magic flying document for the age of bureaucracy. A fantasy of extraordinary power, which no one and no country, either in peace or war, possesses, least of all, Charles De Gaulle, who in 1941 was a fugitive in London.

Having the magic letters gives Rick the power of life and death. Over whom?

Into Casablanca flies “Victor Laszlo”, a Czech famous as “an anti-fascist” all over the world. Today he would be called “a celebrity anti-fascist”. What has he done? Why is he so well known?

He was imprisoned by the Nazis when they took Czechoslovakia in March 1939. When someone speaks of Laszlo, Blaine shows a rare respect. He agrees with Victor Laszlo’s politics? It seems he used to. At any rate, he greatly admires the man and his activities.

To Rick, Laszlo is his old ideal of his old, abandoned, self. Louis: “It’s the first time I’ve seen you impressed”. Rick: “He’s impressed half the world”. When Blaine and Laszlo meet, Laszlo knows about him: “One hears a great deal about Rick in Casablanca”.

“And of Victor Laszlo everywhere?” Laszlo: “I try”. “Rick: “We all try: you succeed”.

When Laszlo at the police station throws rhetoric at Renault and Strasser — “Kill all the resisters in Europe and hundreds, thousands, will rise to take their place” — Strasser replies: “But no one could replace you”!

When Laszlo arrives we see no half-starved revolutionary fugitive but a prosperous bourgeois gentleman, who travels by air with his elegant wife, Ilsa, and books a table at Casablanca’s leading nightclub. He is said by Louis to be able to “offer a fortune” for exit visas. He offers Rick 200,000 francs.

The Nazis want Laszlo, we learn, because he knows and could tell them the names of the “heads of all the resistance movements” and their whereabouts, in all the capitals of Europe, “including Berlin”.

But this too is a fantasy. No one would possess such information, not even, for instance, British Intelligence, whose business it would have been to keep contact with them and gather such information. There was no one “resistance” movement. There were different resistance movements, defined by their politics, in conflict with each other, often murderously. Between different parts of national resistance movements there was civil war, latent or open: in France, the Gaullist and the Stalinist-led resistances, in Yugoslavia, the royalist Chetniks and the Stalinist Partisans... This is a boy’s comic and a naive adult’s idea of “The Resistance”.

Laszlo is an “anti-fascist resistance leader”. Politics? Unspecified. All we learn is that before the Nazis took over Czechoslovakia (March 1939) he had published a paper that, according to Major Strasser, spread “foul lies about the Reich”. He has escaped after a year in a German concentration camp.

He is a mere Czech nationalist, roused to revolutionary fury by the German occupation of his country? The details and circumstances of the film and some of the dialogue in it strongly suggest that Laszlo, with his status and wide fame for not much, is either a CPer or an ally built up by the Comintern’s world-wide publicity network.

Rick: “Don’t you sometimes wonder if it’s worth all this? I mean what you’re fighting for”.

Laszlo: “You might as well discuss why we breathe. Stop breathing and you die. Stop fighting our enemies and the world will die”.

This is all coded and abstract, but it is not the philosophy of a mere Czech nationalist roused by the Nazi takeover of this country. More like a person in for the duration, for whom there is no home but the struggle.

Or take Isla, trying to persuade Rick to give her the letters of transit. “I know how you feel, but put your feelings aside for something more important”.

Rick: “Do I have to hear again what a great man your husband is, and hear again what a great man your husband is and what an important cause he is fighting for?”

Ilsa: “It was your cause too. In your own way you were fighting for the same thing”. This is a member of an inner circle appealing to someone in the outer layers.

Laszlo is a Dimitrov figure. Georgi Dimitrov, a veteran Bulgarian Communist, stood trial in Germany in 1933 charged with burning down the Reichstag. His co-defendant, Marinus Van Der Lubbe, a council communist, was found guilty and beheaded. Dimitrov behaved with bravery and defiance, defending himself and his politics. confronting Nazi Germany in the courtroom.

Revolutionaries of his generation routinely behaved like that in the courts of their enemy.

Acquitted, Dimitrov was elevated in the Stalinist pantheon to the role of world anti-fascist hero of heroes, a leader-figurehead. He was Secretary of the Communist International in the Popular Front period, formally inaugurated by the 7th World Congress in July-August 1935.

POWER AND REVENGE: MR RICK AND ILSA

The letters of transit would magic Laszlo and Ilsa out of the reach of Vichy and the Nazis, and on to America. Without them they are trapped in Casablanca, stranded. Ilsa, plausibly, will remind Rick that without the letters Laszlo will die there.

On to the bureaucratic power fantasy of the Letters of Transit is now grafted a revenge fantasy. Rick had had an affair with Ilsa in Paris. It ended abruptly on the day in 1940 when the Nazis conquerors marched into Paris.

Rick has “a Nazi price on his head”. He must flee. He had arranged to meet Ilsa at the station. Waiting in drenching rain, like the fascist deluge engulfing Europe, he gets a note telling him she is not going with him, and that they will never meet again. She has abandoned him. Without a word of explanation. (As Rick is a bullshitter, Ilsa, we will see, is a great liar.)

Knowing Rick has “a price on his head”, she writes as she does, so she will explain to him later, so that he will leave (though she and Laszlo, the very well known fugitive, will stay).

For much of the film, Rick is psychically one of the walk-



The functioning fascist in Casablanca, the chief of Vichy-French and colonial repression, is the local police chief, Renault (on the right in the picture above). He is presented as a redeemable character.

ing-wounded, a casualty in the sex war. It redefines Rick as man and politician.

This sort of transformation is what happened in politics to a vast number of Ricks when Russia, the great anti-fascist power and inspiration, suddenly made a pact with Germany in August 1939, freeing Hitler to start World War Two and joining with Germany to take part of Poland, Romania and, after a five-month Russo-Finnish war, of Finland.

Rick leaves Paris, his “insides kicked out”, as he says, by the brutal sudden rupture. We see him standing at the door as the train moves out, looking shell-shocked.

He wallows masochistically in the painful memories: he nurses his wounds, bathes in them, scratches them to keep them raw. He has re-elaborated and, reconstructed himself around them. The wound has come to be his identity, his conception of himself and of the world. The old Rick drowned in self-pity.

When a young Bulgarian woman is willing to sacrifice her sexual virtue to the blackmailing cop Louis as the price of visas for herself and her husband, and asks Rick if it would be right to do that for her husband and herself, he replies, close to tears: “No-one ever loved me enough”. Rick Blaine is a self-pitying mess.

And now, in Casablanca, this man possesses the letters of transit, the bureaucratic flying-visa on which Laszlo and Ilsa could escape; he has the power of life and death over them.

While Rick is almost in tears of self-pity, talking to the Bulgarian woman, his staff is agog with his favour to her husband, letting him win money on the crooked roulette wheel to bribe the police with. Rick has released the woman from having to make a painful choice, like the one that faces him... And Ilsa in Paris.

“Boss, you did a beautiful thing”, his “crazy Russian” barman tells him.

The film is concerned with the interplay of different sorts of power, of dominance and submission, sadism and masochism. Ilsa still has power over Rick, even when he hates her. And Rick now, having the letters of transit, has the power of life and death over Ilsa and Laszlo. Power will shift yet again.

Rick is asked to abet Ilsa’s continuing “betrayal”, help her husband and herself go to the film’s paradise, America, from which Rick himself has been expelled or escaped. Where he himself can no longer go.

Ilsa comes late at night to the club to explain what had happened in Paris. Prowling, strafing searchlights emanating

from the symbolic tower flash through the windows of the darkened club, roughly probing, poking, intruding, menacing. They express Rick’s sexual imagination and his turmoil.

He expects that Ilsa will come, wants her to, wills her to. Waiting, he gets drunk, beating himself up, pining also for America. The inner Rick. By the time she does arrive, he is very drunk. He greets her with spurting drunken prurience about her recent sexual history.

An uninhibited sexually aggressive male, baiting her about her sexual proclivities. “Who was it you left me for? Was it Laszlo, or were there others in between?” Voice campy: “Or aren’t you the *kind that tells?*” Prurient, and fascinated.

It is very nasty. And revealing. She goes at that point. He collapses into drunken sleep, head on his arms on the table, still- burning cigarette between his fingers.

And it’s not only when he is drunk. Sober, he contrives a meeting with her next day in the market place. Here the soured lust is open, unfiltered.

He is chatty, she is cold and hostile. This is the grown up version of Ilsa. Did she come last night, he asks her, to explain “why you ran out on me in Paris?” He is sorry he wasn’t in “a fit state to receive you.” Her story confused him. “Tell me now”.

“I don’t think I will, Rick. The Rick I knew in Paris, I could tell him.” She could. But she didn’t. “He’d understand”. “Last night I saw what had happened to you”. She had no part in it.

Then, Rick, propositions her, crudely and, in the circumstances, insultingly. First he offers a seriously stupid cop-out interpretation of her behaviour. He asks the companion of the fugitive Laszlo if she left him because she knew theirs would be forever a life of hiding from the police, on the run all the time. For Rick the political dimension of Ilsa doesn’t exist. He wasn’t aware of it in Paris and he isn’t now.

“I’m settled now” he assures her, “above a saloon, it is true”. He tells her how to get there: “Up the outside stairs. I’ll be expecting you”.

With a hard distancing flicker of her eyes, the camera focused on her face, she declines. Rick’s next words leave no doubt what sort of invitation it is: “All the same, some day you’ll lie to Laszlo”. If not me...

She is a woman who has once kicked over the traces, broken the taboos and the rules. And, therefore, she will do it again. It is her nature. This is anti-climactic: randy Othello propositioning Ophelia years after she’s run away from him.

She is frozen against him. She tells him: “I’ll be leaving



The refugees in Casablanca, strangely, have no worries about getting in to the USA. They worry only about getting exit visas from Morocco.

Casablanca soon and we'll never see each other again." A clear break, heavily sprinkled with self-righteousness and hypocrisy. The break is clear, cold, hard, and final. Ilsa, the grown-up.

Immediately, we switch to a scene in which Laszlo bargains with Ferrari (Sydney Greenstreet) for visas. As they discuss, Ilsa listens intently, like an intelligent child, eyes back and forth between the two men as one speaks, then back again. Being instructed. Learning from the men of business. Learning. Understanding.

This is not the Ilsa we have just seen with Blaine. This is the little girl version of Ilsa. Ferrari tells them that Rick has the letters of transit, and he is now their only hope.

Ilsa isn't, as she had thought when she dismissed him, finished with Blaine, yet. She needs to win his good will.

ILSA AND MR RICK

The need for the letters of transit and a threat from Strasser send Ilsa to confront Rick again., She perhaps blames herself for Rick's refusal to sell the letters of transit and Laszlo's plight now.

Desperate, she comes to Rick Blaine a second time, to his flat above the saloon, again late at night. This time she has a gun. Rick is sober but still unrelentingly spiteful. The powerless wounded underdog, so recently spurned again, has the power here, and relishes it.

They know each other. Like the imperialist rivals in the war, each spits bits of truth at the other. She tells him that he is a coward and a weakling; he tells her that she is an incorrigible liar.

Indeed. This is the only time the truth is spoken about Casablanca's social lion, Mr Rick, who abandons his cause because of a personal wound. Politically serious, convinced

people hold themselves to their politics, however they get there psychologically.

When Laszlo asks Mr Rick why he won't give or sell them the documents, Rick snitches on Ilsa: "ask your wife", the one he has just propositioned.

There is a terrible political shamelessness here, and a measure of how low Blaine has sunk. His co-thinker asks for help against the common fascist enemy, on which his life may depend, and all Mr Rick can think or say is: I have an old grievance against your wife. Ask her.

He says to Ilsa, on this second visit, that he "won't listen to a word you say". She has proved to be a liar in the past. Her word is not to be trusted. "You'd say anything to get what you want".

She pulls out the gun, to threaten the letters of transit out of him. He tells her to shoot him. "Go ahead. You'd be doing me a favour."

At this abject revelation of his dependence, Ilsa breaks down too. She regresses, instantly surrendering to the values and self-centred concerns of the man she has just called coward, weakling, and deserter. She breaks down his resistance and then abandons herself, Laszlo and their cause.

Why this should have that effect on her is not obvious. Everything, including the lights on the flashing tower, suggests that at this point, they fuck. And then she tells him that she is willing to leave Laszlo, her politics and her cause, and Laszlo's cause, as Rick has done, and stay with Rick.

Ilsa is simply fickle? There is more than one way of fighting for Laszlo, and of handling the demoralised Rick.

The seemingly reignited personal relationship promises to get her more than pleading, or reminding Rick of his once-upon-a-time politics, or the gun got her. There is a shift of power back to Ilsa.

She tacitly assumed that Rick will now let Laszlo go.

Afterwards she abdicates all responsibility. To this Ilsa nothing counts now but her sexual reconnection with Rick. She tells him that from now on he must "do the thinking" for both of them.

Is she straight, or is she "playing" him, to get the letters of transit? So extreme and sudden a shift would arouse the suspicion of anyone who wanted it less than Mr Rick, who has just characterised her as an untrustworthy liar, does.

As the film unfolds, on the surface anyway, from this point on Ilsa is passive, inert, dead matter. A mere plot prop, like the letters of transit. A disgrace to every self-respecting woman watching.

Or is she? She is according to what we see; but nothing that happens after that contradicts the idea that she might not be, and in fact is "playing" Blaine. There is more than surface here.

At the start of Casablanca, Mr Rick is a political dropout. Possession of the magic visa that Laszlo desperately needs (and may have expected to collect from Mr Ugarte) puts him back in the political game, and with a very strong hand to play.

At first he counterposes himself and his grudge to the people and the politics he has openly admired in Laszlo. He must now choose either to go back ("come back", as Laszlo almost puts it) to his old politics or become its active enemy. The Marseillaise scene in the club will be his decisive turning point.

ILSA

The reactionary elements in Casablanca are strong and they are numerous. The portrait of Ilsa is one of them.

In a world in which there were a lot of liberated women activists. Laszlo goes out to the meeting of the resistance

group. Ilsa stays home. They make politics, she makes coffee. Her political role is to look adoringly at Laszlo as he leads the night club in singing the Marseillaise.

The beautiful, honest-seeming, open, actor's face of Ingrid Bergman masks what Ilsa is, her character.

Ilsa is the most complex personality in Casablanca. She is its sexual centre. But in her character Ilsa is more the sneaky child than a grown-up self-respecting woman.

The woman with Rick in the market, hard and cold and adroitly dosing herself with hypocrisy — she could have talked to the old Rick! In the next scene, she is like a little girl with the grown-ups.

Younger than Rick and Laszlo, in her relations with them she is sometimes more child to “the adults” than one of them. She is a female-child guerrilla in a male-occupied world. She manipulates, like a powerless child, or a warped adult.

Her weapon of defence and attack is the lie. Ilsa is a devout, dedicated, multi-skilled, prolific liar. She tells truth to no one. Not to Rick in Paris, about Laszlo; not, as far as we see, to Laszlo in Casablanca about Rick. She lies by omission and by direct denial when asked a direct question; she feigns not knowing what she knows; always she operates behind misdirection about what she wants and intends.

Her character is plain from her first scene, in the night club. She innocently asks who is “‘the boy’ playing the piano”, as if she didn't know Sam, and then asks about Rick, “who's he”? As if she hadn't pieced it together from the club's name in neon above the door, Rick's Café Américain, and the presence of Sam.

She then, all innocence, insists that Sam play “their”, her and Rick's, special song, and Rick comes running as to a bugle-call. Having arranged their encounter at the club, right down to insisting, “play it, Sam...”, the song that brings Rick running, she tells Rick that she wouldn't have come to Casablanca if she'd known he was there. Laszlo and Ilsa had a choice about where to go?

She admits to Laszlo (who has guessed) that she knew Rick in Paris, and lies that she scarcely knew him. As she prepares to desert Rick in Paris, she doesn't tell him about what she intends to do. She plays a sadistic game with him: “Kiss me as if it were the last time”, relishing the power of knowing, when Rick doesn't, that it really is the last time.

She enjoys and seeks this sort of control, power over those who deal with her. Manipulation, not candour, relish in the power of knowing what others don't.

She seeks, finagles, appropriates that power by lying and misdirection. She hoards information as a miser hoards money.

At the end of the film, she is with Laszlo and they are on their way to the airport, but she doesn't tell him she is staying with Rick. Ilsa is setting up Laszlo for the kind of blow-on-the-head surprise at the airport which she gave Rick at the Paris railway station.

She wants him to walk slap into the big surprise, and to be powerless to do anything about it? Or is it Blaine she intends to surprise again?

She says she expected Rick to tell Laszlo. In the taxi to the airport it was plain that Laszlo did not know what was happening. Did she ask him to kiss her as if it were the last time?

Judged by grown-up standards, all this is seriously nasty. All through, Ilsa is a wayward, willful, sneaky child, lying by deed and omission, and finagleing. From choice, and relish in it.

She is perhaps moved by Rick's abject woundedness, by his confession of his dependence. But if she is, how is she moved?

Rick issues one sort of invitation: she comes for another purpose, and stays to serve her own by accommodating his.

Rick has already, in the market, revealed himself. Ilsa knows that though Rick “looked at me with such hatred” in the club when he is drunk, he lusts after her. “A kiss is still a kiss”...

When the gun fails to get her what she wants from him, his prostration and his lust suggests other possibilities. She has another weapon.

It is perfectly possible to interpret Ilsa after she appears to surrenders to Rick as manipulating him to get the letters of transit. And that she intends what does happen: she goes with Laszlo.

Rick is the active agent in organising that outcome, it seems, but how do we interpret Ilsa's confusion when Rick



The song “Dirty Old Town” has gone through the same divorce from its original references as Casablanca

“Dirty old town”

A vast number of popular singers have by now recorded Ewan McColl's song “Dirty Old Town.” Luke Kelly, Liam Clancy, Esther Offarim, The Pogues, Rod Stewart (in Las Vegas!), Paddy Reilly, Van Morrison, Roger Whittaker, Julie Felix, and many others.

It is sung by Manchester United supporters at football matches. (Salford is part of Manchester).

It is a good song, I think. It was made in 1949 for performance at London's Unity Theatre, an ancillary organisation of the British Communist Party (CP).

I met my love,
By the gas works wall.
Dreamed a dream,
By the old canal...
I heard a siren,
From the docks.
Saw a train,
Set the night on fire.
Smelled the spring,
On the smoky wind.
Dirty old town,

What is it about? It doesn't name MacColl's native city, Manchester-Salford, but it is generally taken to represent that dirty mid-20th century old industrial town. Is it a romantic evocation of love, of the struggles of the young in that sexually repressive age? Is it ecological protest: we need to clean up after the industrial revolution?

In fact, when it first appeared the song was, and was heard and understood as, a fierce denunciation of capitalism. The dirty old town and working class life in it are a metaphor for capitalism, as the Communist Party at that time saw it – decrepit, having outstayed its proper span of historical time.

The lovers are what they are, but they are and also represent all workers living in this world. And what does the song say is to be done about it?

The answer is vivid yet not explicit:

I'm going to make,
Me a good sharp axe;
Shining steel,
Tempered in the fire.
We'll chop you down,
Like an old dead tree.
Dirty old town,
Dirty old town.

Axe is metaphor. For what? To that 1949 audience, the axe of “shining steel tempered in the fire”, was the Communist Party of Great Britain, a “Party of a New Type”, as their jargon had it. “A column of steel”.

The good sharp axe, the Party, was forged of steely humans, tempered in the fires of working class action and in steel-like discipline, training, hardness of mind and obdurate conviction. With the 1949 CPers these were words and images in everyday use as feeling, thought, speech and writings: their jargon of political self-hood. What they felt for themselves and their comrades and what they thought they were doing in politics. What they intended to do to dirty, decrepit, life-stifling old capitalism.

In 1949, the song was a celebration of Communist Parties, and specifically of the British party, and an appeal to listeners to join, to make themselves part of what the Communist Party members and sympathisers in that audience believed what they were forging to be: the weapon of weapons against capitalism. The living axe. Shining steel. Steely people and shining steely ideals. And the party of the leader whose chosen name, Stalin, meant Man of Steel: McColl also wrote a hymn in praise of Stalin.

The song was common and easily understood in the folk clubs of the 50s and 60s, most of which were quasi-political. The Dubliners' Luke Kelly popularized it to a wider audience. Luke Kelly was a member of the 26 County Irish Workers League, and after the reunification of the two Irish Stalinist organisations in 1970, of the Communist Party of Ireland, When he sang it, he sang McColl's meaning in it.

That political meaning fell away. The metaphors have migrated back to more literal meanings. Having football crowds sing it would to McColl in 1949 have seemed a great triumph. Except that it no longer has his meaning. That is mostly forgotten now, or never known.

A song of course has as many meanings as listeners choose to see in it, and meanings change from audience to audience, singer to singer, time to time. When Dirty Old Town is sung by Manchester United fans at football matches, it is about Manchester/Salford.

It is idle to dispute about what it “really” means. All we can do is place it in its initial context, its authors meaning, and what the early audiences made of it.

And so also with Casablanca. Casablanca, once full of living and recognisable references to political events, realities and parallels, is now shot through with dead political references, clear and oblique, to things forgotten or half forgotten, no longer easily intelligible.



tells her she is going with Laszlo? She did not expect Rick to cut free? She thought she was in control?

We have already seen her expertly feign ignorance at her first scene in the club. She is good at it.

One thing seems clear from what we see and hear in the film: Ilsa loves and admires her husband. Apart from the scene in Rick's flat the manifestations of Ilsa's love are all for Laszlo. When we see love and admiration on Ilsa's face, it is directed at Laszlo, not Rick. She and Laszlo have an intensely loving relationship. She goes from her coldness to blundering Rick to the verbal, smiling, love-in with Laszlo.

In the Marseillaise scene we see love and awe on her face as she watches Laszlo go through a mimic of conducting it. Rick's nod to the band to play the Marseillaise, evoked by Laszlo, shows that Rick is not quite dead to his old causes. He takes sides. The scene neatly parodies the relationship between political "front" organisations and their real controllers.

When Laszlo suggests that Ilsa should go on alone, there is a fond remembrance of when Laszlo could have gone on without her and wouldn't. Laszlo tries to get Ilsa out, without him.

Even if you believe in the all-healing Reichian big fuck,

Ilsa's absolute flipping over is too complete, too sudden. The actors are great playing it, but it is unconvincing.

At the end Rick tells Laszlo a story: Ilsa had tried to get the letters of transit from him by pretending to be in love with him, but all that was over long ago. What he says is not what we have seen between Rick and Ilsa.

AMERICA IN CASABLANCA

America is one of the characters in Casablanca. Uncle Sam is always present in people's minds, on the tip of their tongues, at the top of their hopes, at the front of their aspirations.

People look up longingly at planes flying overhead, if not to America, then to the staging post for America, Lisbon.

Everybody approves of America. Loves it. Accepts it as earthly perfection. Longs to go there. A Mitteleuropean old couple speaking cutely inexact English for practice ("What Vatch is it? Ten Vatch") discuss America with the wistful old waiter Carl (S. Z. Sakall) relishing in anticipation the precious gift they are receiving: tomorrow they fly off to America.

America is the promised land. Everyone wants to go to paradise across the Atlantic. Never once is it hinted that America might not let them in. America is without fault in

their dilemma as stranded refugees: the only problem is in getting out so that they can go there.

The night club is its annex. Rick who can't go home, has been cast out of paradise. He is fatalistic and masochistically resigned. In the end Ilsa and Laszlo flying off to America realise the goal that is everyone's goal. They do what everyone wants to do.

The film is awash with raw, unthinking American chauvinism. It is almost a surprise that no one recites John of Gaunt's paean to England, suitably adapted:

"That other Eden, demi-paradise, that happy breed of men, that precious stone set in the silver sea against the envy of less happier lands, that earth, that realm, that... Yankland".

Perhaps the single most shocking thing about Casablanca, even 75 years later, is the picture it paints of its collective audience. It stakes its cost of production on the assumption that its audience has no knowledge of politics, of world affairs, of who is who in international politics, of the plight of millions of refugees, and specifically of Jewish refugees, as the Holocaust gathers momentum in the lands controlled by the Nazis. Here, Casablanca is an almost malicious mockery of the reality.

The target audience has no knowledge of the world outside the USA. It will believe in magical letters of transit. It will believe that the outlawed, émigré French die-hard, Charles De Gaulle, a fugitive in London, can sign papers that are binding on the rest of the world and cannot be rescinded.

The audience will not know that refugees lack entry visas above all. It will believe that the Americans occupied Berlin in 1918. (Louis tells us that, in a mock-triumphal riposte to Strasser's contempt for "Blundering Americans": in fact, Berlin was not occupied in 1918).

They are willing to believe that political commitment will be "well paid" (as Rick is in Spain and Ethiopia); are willing to accept Louis as a good guy when he turns against Germany. They do not notice, or, noticing, will not be put off by, the fact that the political and historical language, and the sub-text, of Casablanca is gibberish, and the details of the film are often preposterous.

SAM THE BOY, REFUGEE

Why does Rick live in a colony run by French quasi-fascists where revolt was drowned in blood in the not so distant past? The answer seems to be that he has little choice.

But why is Sam in exile? It is never explained why Sam can't go home. Black people who saw Casablanca would know. If Rick "can't" go home; Sam might not want to.

Sam too is a refugee, fleeing in the opposite direction to the others. The common Nirvana of everyone else in Casablanca is to the American black man a racist hell-place. Like some famous black American expatriates he had found France to be comparatively a refuge. But Sam and Rick, in their relationship, bring some of America with them. Sam can't fully escape.

Most films of the time showed Negroes as scarcely-human simpletons. Casablanca shows Sam as a man with dignity and sense and a mind and feelings as developed, at least, as those around him.

That was good for an American film then. But it was not unique, or much of a break-through either. Some other films did that, and some did it better. (Babyface, for instance, a decade earlier.)

Sam is a musician. He is Rick's partner, his "sidekick", as American cowboy films had it then. They have been together for years. He gets 10% of the profits of the club.

When a rival club-owner offers to buy Sam the musician from him, Rick makes high-minded: he doesn't "buy or sell human beings". Sam is a person. Sam is not his servant. Yet Sam, unlike everyone else in the film, for instance, the policeman Louis or the bar-worker Carl, addresses him as "Mr Richard". Sam also addresses Ilsa as "Miss Ilsa".

It was sometimes polite American usage, coupling title with first name: but no one else in the film uses it. The cop and Rick are friends, equals. Sam, his friend and partner, evidently is not quite an equal.

Sam is not designated as a servant, but some of the time he acts like one. In the deluge as the Nazis enter Paris, Sam carries two bags to the train, evidently one of them Rick's, to Rick's one, to the train.

They fall into the role of master and servant naturally. This



Fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto rising of 1943

is the natural role for a mere black man to fall into – a perpetual life-long “boy”. The fine talk about not selling Sam serves to underline it.

Sam is not sold any more, but he knows his place. The others know his place too. Ilsa refers to Sam, who will not see 40 again, as the “boy” — “the boy who’s playing the piano”. Rick is the man and Sam the boy.

In a world in which white boys in time grow naturally to be men, the Negro was forever a “boy”. If he lived to be an old man he would still be a boy at 70.

And there is a surprising absence from the great scene in which the club – the world against the Nazis – sings the Marseillaise: Sam. We hear his piano playing, but there are no shots of him joining in the fervent singing of the great hymn to liberty and defiance of tyrants. He is the club singer, but he is not in this scene.

In the way they depict Sam, *Casablanca*’s makers show that they are enemies of American racism.

The confrontation of the songs and the singers is the world against Germany. But Sam, like the colonies, like Morocco, is not part of this free world.

One of the great symbolic moments in the struggle for human liberty occurred when the people of Saint-Domingue, who had freed themselves from slavery as part of the great French revolution (1789-94), confronted the French army of the Emperor Bonaparte that had come to restore slavery.

To taunt and shame the turncoats against liberty, the ex-slaves sang the Marseillaise, throwing the charge of apostasy

at them.

Not in *Casablanca*. Just as the film wouldn’t risk offending its target audience by showing Sam as too uppity, or Rick encouraging him in it, it was thought, evidently, that an American black man fervently singing a song about freedom as the whole club sings would have had a message about the US itself that would have alarmed and alienated too many Americans.

CASABLANCA: REFUGEES AND JEWS

Quite a few people with Jewish background or affiliation were involved in making *Casablanca*. The three named and Oscar-winning writers — the Epstein brothers and Howard Koch — the director, Michael Curtiz, and the Warner brothers, for whom the studio that made it was named, all were Jewish in origin and background.

But there are no Jews in *Casablanca*. There is no mention of Jews, or of Jewish refugees. That’s remarkable for a film about refugees, in a world where the especially murderous refugee problem is the plight of Jewish refugees, and the hunting of Jews all over Europe out of where they were settled.

It is a world in which the unwillingness of countries, in the first place the USA, but also Britain, Ireland, Sweden and others, to let in Jewish fugitives, or enough of them, was already turning into the Holocaust. The Nazis’ systematic slaughter of two out of every three Jews who were alive in Europe in mid-1941 had begun. That mass murder was being done was

already known, though not yet the scale and thoroughness of it.

After Kristallnacht in 1938, the Nazis had accelerated the drive to force Jews to emigrate. But where could they go? Which country would let them in? Not the USA! Evidently the makers of the film were afraid of an anti-Jewish backlash if they focused on Jewish refugees.

LOUIS

The much-quoted last line, “Louis, this looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship”, is radically false.

Rick’s and Louis’s friendship has shaped the story. Their real relationship is summed up in Rick lying about his profits from the Spanish war to impress Louis, and Louis referring his blackmail target, the young Bulgarian woman, to Rick for reassurance that Louis would keep his bargain.

Louis Renault, the cop, is the character who ties the film most clearly to the real political world around it. He personifies the political ambivalences of the film. Renault is Vichy France in *Casablanca*. He is the man in control of the police, of the French state power there.

By his deeds “Louis”, not Major Strasser, is the fascist in the film. Defined by what he does and directs others in doing, he is far more of an active villain than the German, Major Strasser, whose villainy is largely ascribed, read off from his uniform and nationality (and is now read backwards from what Nazism came to mean later).

Louis is a high official in the colony of a quasi-fascist state.

He is the Procurator, the Gauleiter, of the colonial city.

The policemen we see shoot down an unarmed man fleeing because he has no identity papers are Renault's police. The Peter Lorre character, who gave Rick the letters of transit, dies in police custody, either from ill-treatment or by deliberate murder – this too is Louis's work, directly or indirectly. The menacing roving searchlights ripping through the night sky, intruding into the shut-down café, are Louis's.

When the German decides he wants the club closed, it is Louis who does what they want done. (In fact the Germans did not have direct control in unoccupied France and its colonies). We see Louis blackmailing a young woman, offering cheap-rate exit visas for sex. It is something he has done many times before. Rick, matter-of-fact, tells the young Bulgarian woman that Louis has always kept to such bargains before.

Everything nasty, authoritarian, fascistic, dictatorial in Casablanca is the work of Louis or of Louis's men acting under his direction. He is the thoroughgoing, all-controlling, villain until he changes sides at the very end of the film.

Louis, like the anti-fascist leader Laszlo, is recognisably a citizen in the Stalinist political theme-park. The French Stalinist leader Maurice Thorez in 1938 appealed to "patriotic" — that is French nationalist and therefore anti-German — French fascists to join in the Popular Front.

At the end Renault will be an anti-German French fascist, a good fascist, his sins and crimes forgiven, hidden and forgiven. The anti-fascist political front is broad enough to include such people. It was big enough to include Mussolini himself, if he came out against Germany.

This was an anti-fascism so broad, or so nonsensical, as to make room for the founder of fascism.

Max Shachtman recorded in 1936: "The Italian Stalinists have just made a shameless appeal to the Black-Shirts for unity, in the interests of Stalin's diplomatic manoeuvres in Europe... the "Communist" Party of Italy, which supported the Stalinist policy in Germany against a united front with the socialists to smash Fascism, has now issued an official appeal to Mussolini's cohorts.

"The official organ of the Comintern informs us that the Italian party secretary, Niccolletti, 'turning to the Fascists of the Old Guard as well as to the Fascist Youth', declares: 'We proclaim that we are ready to fight together with you and with the entire people of Italy, for carrying out the Fascist program of 1919, and for every demand which represents a special or general direct interest of the toilers and the people of Italy'."

In Italy, in 1943 and after fascists, who turned against Mussolini and Germany were made honorary democrats. Marshal Badoglio, who deserved to be hanged for war crimes in Ethiopia, no less than some of those who were hanged at the

end of the war, became Prime Minister of Italy under Allied Patronage.

The idea here of "good" bad people would govern US foreign policy for the cold-war epoch of its struggle against Stalinist Russia — the philosophy expressed by one US president: "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch".

In Casablanca, colonialism is seen as natural, nothing to do with fascism, or the "democracy" and anti-fascism with which the film is concerned. At one point Laszlo, who opposed German conquest in Czechoslovakia, will proclaim that they are on "French territory". Colonialism is good, so long as it is on the patented "democratic" side.

There wasn't much in the way of democracy for the Moroccans, or for the people in France's neighbouring Algerian colony. 100,000 people would be massacred there by the French in 1945. The Algerians from 1954 would have to fight a terrible eight-year long colonial war against France to win freedom.

Ambivalence, doubleness, and the boy's-comic character of its politics may be one key to the popularity of Casablanca. It is cosy: not even the Nazis are nazi-nasty. And the nastiest character, Louis, turns out good... The World War seen from a nightclub.

The purely negative politics of anti-fascism allow all sorts of things to remain undisturbed or attached to it, without discomfort.

In one scene a member of the resistance identifies himself to Laszlo by opening a signet ring with the Cross of Lorraine inside — the Gaullist Free French emblem: this is from the Hollywood rendition of the Count of Monte Cristo or the Mark of Zorro.

The most affecting scene in Casablanca, and the turning point of the film, is the fervent singing of the Marseillaise, in the night club. The Marseillaise is surely the best political song ever made. Before the Russian Revolution, it used to be sung at working-class movement meetings all over Europe, including Britain.

The feelings burst out. The German officers are verbally overpowered and silenced — seven of them against the rest of the world in the club.

Many of those in the scene were refugees themselves. Here they were not acting. The episode brings all the strands in the story together. Rick's nod to the band to do as Laszlo wants and play the Marseillaise is the point of his political reawakening, forced by Laszlo. And yet...

They sing this wonderful, evocative song of the French Revolution in a colony which Imperial France, even in defeat, holds by force, by as much coercion and murder of its indigenous peoples as necessary. Force against which the French Communist Party of the 1920s — a different Communist Party then, an honest revolutionary workers' party — had mounted a tremendous anti-war campaign.

From 1954 to 1962 France will fight, and lose, a terrible colonial war in Algeria. Resuming control in Indochina in 1946 — when the Stalinists both in Indochina and Paris, where they were in the government, backed French resumption of power- France will fight, and lose, a long colonial war there too.

The singing contest in the club involves two imperialisms, one ascendant, the other, for now, defeated.

A DORMANT ANTI-FASCIST AWAKES

In the film we see Rick is back with the self-same woman who had caused him to change from a selfless "anti-fascist" into a predatory cynic, masochistically obsessed with his own wound, and become, self-spitingly, a close friend of the city's Vichy police chief, the man in charge of the repression in Casablanca.

He relives the drama, but now he has the power of decision for everyone. He holds Laszlo's life in his hands.

In effect he endorses the choice she made in Paris, where she "loved" Rick — or did she? — but chose politics and duty with Laszlo. Her values are vindicated, but he chooses, and she herself is now a passive piece of baggage for someone else — Rick — to dispose of.

If what we see on the screen is for real, and Isla is not playing Rick, she has become a walking affront to every self-respecting woman in the audience!

The active and the passive roles in this relationship have now been swapped around. Rick surrenders to the Isla of 1940 and to the maybe-scheming Isla of 1941.

WHY IS CASABLANCA SO POPULAR?

Despite all this, the film still "works". Why?

Because as a film it is a tremendously good piece of work. The story unfolds at a quick pace. Michael Curtiz was a great director. Bogart, Bergman, and Henreid give wonderful performances. So do all the actors. The players carry conviction and fervour.

There was one genuine anti-Nazi hero in the film: the actor who played the German officer, Conrad Veidt, had a serious record of fighting the Nazis. He had been a major star in the pre-Hitler German cinema. With his Jewish wife, he chose to leave Germany just after Hitler became Chancellor. On a visit to Germany, he was briefly imprisoned by the Nazis. He became a British citizen.

In Britain, in 1934, Veidt made one of the rare movies of the period which explored antisemitism, *Jew Süss*. It was based on the historical novel of the same name by Lion Feuchtwanger, a Jew and a man of the left. In 1940 the Nazis would make a notorious anti-semitic film of the same name.

Perhaps part of the explanation of why Casablanca still works is this: within its romantic conventions it is a cosily committed feel-good film.

In retrospect we see the film's villains as more villainous than the film-makers could possibly have. We project. The Nazi enemy is unquestionably villainous: that enhances their opponents in the film. The good guy is reluctant, but all the more convincing when he gets going.

And there is in it an invocation of a possible better world to be had for the fighting for. A world of unknown possibilities into which you could write those you wanted.

Illusions can easily be harnessed, or mis-harnessed by the dominant power in society for their goals.

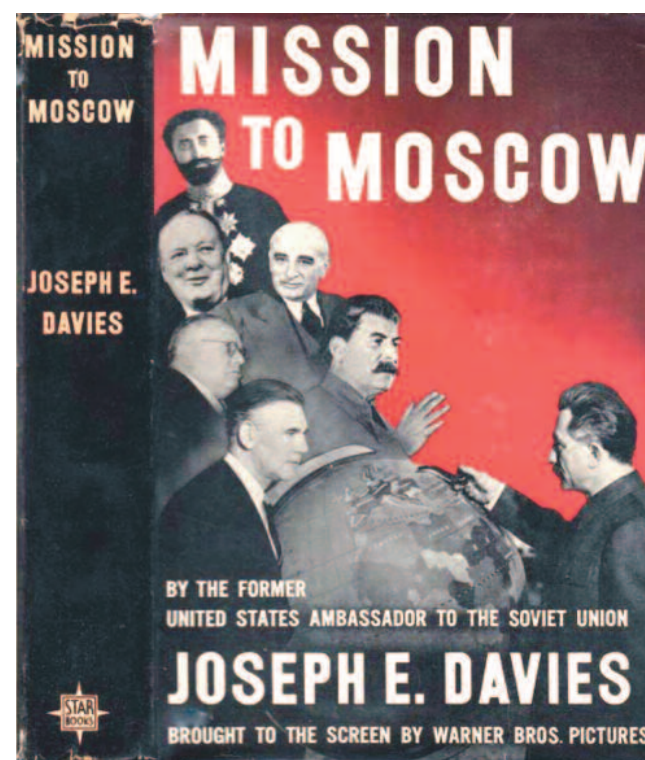
In short, the film shows the world of official "Allied" World War Two propaganda. It is the same "official" anti-fascist world which the British people took seriously enough in 1945 to pursue, by dismissing the respected Tory war leader Winston Churchill and electing, by a landslide, a Labour government pledged to radical change.

Maybe it is the film's power still to evoke that mood and take its audience into it for a while, away from our own commercial capitalist civilisation, grubby and soulless but unashamed, that explains Casablanca's continuing appeal.

The collection of clichés in Casablanca transmuted by talent, as heat transmutes carbon into synthetic diamonds, into a prism for the ideas of an age, still conveys to us some glimmer of the as yet unrealised hopes of that age. And our own lack of it and hunger for something like it.



Conrad Veidt, who plays the part of the senior German officer in the film, was in fact an opponent of and refugee from Nazism



The film Mission to Moscow was based on a book by, and endorsed by, the former US ambassador to the USSR, Joseph E Davies

Stalinism and its zig zags

To understand Casablanca's subtexts, we need to look at what the Stalinists were doing in the 1930s and in 1942.

The Communist parties wore political masks, dressed for different parts, and changed their guise as and when Moscow thought they needed to. At the heart was keeping in alignment with Russian interests, needs and directives.

Core political Stalinism outside Russia, always and everywhere so long as it remained itself, was service to Russia, devotion to the idea that socialism was being built there and it was the duty of socialists to serve it. Everything else in their governing values and in their practical politics came lower in the political scales than that.

They would do anything, "make any alliance, pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe", to assure the survival and the success of the socialist state. They would follow any line decreed by Moscow, say and do anything thought useful, whether truth or lies, wear any political mask that would help them bamboozle and manipulate useful dupes, say the opposite today to what they were saying yesterday, and might say again tomorrow. They would do everything and anything Russia's rulers thought would be to their advantage. Even to allying with the Nazis in Germany before 1933, and in Europe and the world in 1939-41.

The devotion to Russia had to be expressed in different, changing political postures and activities. Thus, the Stalinists wore political and social masks, they played political charades, assumed different identities from time to time. The Stalinists contended with their opponents by waging an unending battle of lies, pretences and masquerades.

For most of the first half of the 1930s, the CPs were open and bitter enemies to non-Stalinist labour movements. They pronounced parties like the big and important German social democratic party to be their main enemy there — "social-fascists". They rejected the politics of a United Front with them against the Nazis. It was a "Trotsky-Fascist" betrayal of the working class to even suggest it.

Episodically, they allied with the Nazis against the Social-Democratic trade unions. They broke and helped break Social-Democrat-led strikes. They backed Nazi initiatives such as their unofficial referendum to throw out the Social Democratic Government in Prussia. (Germany was a federal state). They joined in the Nazi agitation for "German Liberation" from the penalties and restrictions imposed in the 1919 Versailles Treaty by the victors in the Great War.

The ultra-leftism of the so-named "Third Period" (1928-9 to 1934) coincided with the great upheavals of forced collectivisation of the peasants, forced march industrialisation, and the annihilation of the working-class movement inside Russia.

On 30 January 1933 Hitler was made Chancellor of Germany, openly pledged to destroy the trade unions, the working-class political parties, civil liberties, the Reichstag. The KPD had its own armed ex-servicemen's militia; so did the Social Democrats. They might have stopped Hitler there and then, or at least tried to.

But they made no attempt to resist the establishment of the Hitler tyranny. The Communist Party peacefully accepted its own outlawry and destruction. So did the social democrats.

They didn't have to. In 1920 a general strike had destroyed a would-be putsch — the so-named Kapp Putsch, an attempt to set up a right-wing dictatorship.

They opposed the Nazi regime only in words. They rejected and stifled moves for a general strike (proposed by a small group of dissident communists, the followers of Leon Trotsky).

The social democrats publicly pledged to engage only in legal action against the new Nazi Government — which decided what was and was not legal... At the crisis point, January to March 1933, before the Nazis had consolidated power, the KPD did the same thing without a formal pledge and



Stalin and Churchill, the wartime allies, as portrayed in Mission to Moscow

with a lot of bluster.

Open resistance would have meant civil war? Hitler in power meant civil war — a one-sided civil war, with the state power, legality, a weapon in the hands of the Nazis. Ultimately Hitler in power triggered the death of perhaps 60 million people in World War Two.

In general the Stalinists acted from 1929 to 1933 as an enabling agency for German Fascism in Hitler's resistible rise to absolute power. In 1939 and after they would play an enabling role for the Nazi conquest of Europe.

Their next phase, from 1934 to August 1939, was an attempt to deal with the results of what the Stalinists had done, or helped do, in the preceding phase. They looked to Germany's old imperialist enemies to stop Hitler. They launched an anti-fascist crusade.

They had shouted in chorus with Hitler against the Versailles Treaty. Now they were ardent defenders of the international Versailles Treaty status quo. Their politics dwindled to loud criticisms of the victor powers of the Great War for not keeping Germany down.

They advocated a "front of the democracies and of the peoples" for a war to prevent war, to stop the "war-like Germans". "The democracies" naturally included the greatest of the democracies, Russia, which in reality was more a totalitarian state than pre-war fascist Germany was.

The Stalinists, who had rejected a United Front of the workers parties, now championed a "People's Front" stretching all the way across the political spectrum to liberals, conservatives, and beyond.

Nazi Germany was now the main enemy. Britain, France, Belgium held great colonial Empires all across the world, as did the Netherlands, but the CPs radically altered their attitude to the empires. Where in colonies there were Communist Parties, they became very tame, half-shamefaced, treacherous allies of the imperial power.

The Versailles Treaty had laid down the geo-political bombs that exploded in World War Two. But the story of the 1930s that the CPs would make told a tale of the victors of World War One failing to maintain the Versailles settlement, and not keeping Germany down.

Independent working-class politics was eclipsed. The

Communist Parties were tied to the new Russian bureaucratic ruling class and the social democrats to their own capitalist ruling classes.

While in fact the Stalinists agitated for a war alliance against Germany, they presented themselves as pseudo-pacifist champions of "international security". They launched a crusade against fascism and for "collective security" against Germany. Russia joined the League of Nations in 1934, aiming to find allies for Russia in the event of a German attack.

The concept of "anti-fascism" now became politically dominant. It didn't matter what anyone was for, so long as they were "anti-fascist", which came to mean anti-German.

As with anti-imperialism today, there were as many sorts of anti-fascist as there were alternatives to fascism.

In their maniacal "Third Period" the CPs had lived in a mental world where all others were fascists of some sort, social-fascists, liberal-fascists, Trotsky fascists. Now not even all fascists were fascists, or enemy fascists.

As the spindle on a machine tool can have different sorts of tools attached to it, so anti-fascism can move different politics. No one was ever a mere anti-fascist. Every anti-fascist was also positively for something else.

In Republican Spain during the fascist-Loyalist civil war there was another civil war, in Republican Catalonia, between anarchists and Trotsky socialists on one side, and the bourgeois element that had not support Franco's clerical fascism, backed by the CP, on the other.

Both sides were anti-fascist, but had divided on what the alternative to fascism should be: which set of anti-fascists killing each other on the streets of Barcelona in May 1937 were the "real" anti-fascists? Or the best?

When French Prime Minister Pierre Laval — yes, that Laval, he who would rule Vichy France — and Stalin signed a mutual defence pact in 1935, Stalin made a public statement that shifted the politics of the Communist Parties everywhere: "M. Stalin recognises the needs of French defence".

Arthur Koestler, an important German Stalinist of the time, tells a story that then circulated among some Comintern people. Laval said to Stalin: what if the French Communists will not accept a policy of defending the French state? Stalin drew his hand across his throat, like a knife. Kill them! Stalin him-

self would now kill vast numbers of communists for them.

Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini learned from each other. In June-July 1934 Hitler purged the “left wing” of the Nazi party, slaughtering hundreds in and after the “Night of the Long Knives”. In December 1934 Stalin started a purge that would kill millions. Mussolini wrote an article proclaiming that Stalin had become a fascist.

In 1936, 1937 and 1938. Stalin mounted three big show trials in Moscow. All the leaders of the Russian Revolution, except Stalin and the safely dead Vladimir Lenin, Yakov Sverdlov and Felix Dzherzhinsky, were indicted, tried and most of them – like many hundreds of thousands of others – shot. All of them had been traitors.

The biggest traitor of all was Leon Trotsky. He too was sentenced to death, in absentia. Trotsky posed the following question about these toxic fairy tales: Of Christ’s 12 disciples, only one, Judas, was a traitor. But if Judas had held power and written the history of it, wouldn’t he have made out that all the other eleven were traitors, and that he alone was faithful.

And then, on 23 August 1939, the world was turned upside down again. God and the Devil, Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, shook hands, agreed to hunt together in a common Nazi-Stalin pack, linked arms and started to stomp a war-dance in step with each other.

This was not a non-aggression pact, but a partnership for war, by which Russia too would acquire territory. Russia undertook to provide large aid in raw materials to the German war machine. Stalin undertook the role of Hitler’s quartermaster, provider of raw materials.

It was the signal for World War Two to begin. Eight days later, on 1 September, relieved of the fear of a Russian attack, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. On 17 September, Russia invaded Poland from the East.

Hitler and Stalin agreed that as well as a third of Poland, Russia would take the three Baltic states, which it duly did in 1940. Russia would also take part of Romania and fight a Hitler-licensed war for territory with Finland.

Russia had facilitated the Nazis conquering power. Now it would facilitate their conquering Europe.

Germany and Russia partitioned Poland. Fascist and Stalinist armies met at an agreed point, as friends. Where it was found that the Germans had occupied a few villages in Poland that were Russia’s by the Pact, they not only handed them over, but in some places marshalled the conquered people to greet the Russians, when they finally arrived, with welcoming cheers and banners.

CPers and fellow-travellers were thrown into political and emotional turmoil by the Stalin-Hitler pact, devastated. Their hostility to fascism had been heart-felt. They did not know that for the core “anti-fascists”, the CP cadre, that was secondary to something else: Russia.

Vyacheslav Molotov had replaced Maxim Litvinov, the foreign minister of the previous period. Litvinov was identified with the anti-fascist-German agitation and the “Popular Front”. He was also Jewish in origin.

Molotov enunciated the new Stalinist line. Fascism? “Fascism is a matter of taste!”, said Molotov. Russia’s “taste” had changed. And the world changed. The Communist Parties around the world swung suddenly and violently away from outraged “anti-fascism”. Stalin declared that the new Russo-German alliance had in Poland been “cemented in blood”

The CPs, and CP sympathisers, the super-anti-fascists of the previous period, were thrown into disarray. A lot of people left. But a hard core remained: the CPers would, after the Russia-serving World War Two partnership with Allied governments turned sour, glamorise themselves as having been “premature” anti-fascists in the Popular Front period. After that, however, had come the period of being pro-Nazi German propagandists.

Some saw the new turn as a return to the revolutionary politics abandoned in 1934-35, and to opposition to the French and British colonial Empires. Some who left or were alienated would come back at the next turn on the political road, in June 1941. At each zig or zag a CP hard core would always remain. The Russian socialist fatherland remained, didn’t it? That was the measure of all things socialistic. Wasn’t it?

But even the Communist Party leaders in Britain and France at first did not catch on to the extent of the change of political line. In Britain, Party Secretary, Harry Pollitt, a man

with some standing in the broad labour movement, beyond the CP, published a pamphlet: “How to Win the War”. German fascism, he believed, was still the enemy, despite its new understanding with Russia.

The Russian gauleiter on the leading committee of the CPGB, David Springhall, has to tell them what Russia required of them in the new situation. The CP experienced a crisis at the top. Pollitt was out as General Secretary. (He would be back, in 1941).

The political leader of the party, Rajani Palme Dutt, theorised publicly that the Pact was a historic capitulation by Germany to workers’ Russia. (They were at war not with Russia but with Britain and France, weren’t they?)

In France the General Secretary, Maurice Thorez (he who in 1938 had publicly called for “patriotic” French fascists to support the Popular Front) enlisted in the French army to show his patriotism. When the penny dropped and the new line became clear, he deserted and fled to Russia!

The CPs were now contracted out, sub let, so to speak, to Germany. They were told to agitate for peace with Hitler, on his terms, and did. Poland? Poland was no more. It had vanished off the map of Europe. Nothing to fight about!

The CPs explained that Germany had no colonial empire. Britain France, and the Netherlands did. They, not Germany, were the imperialists. And who had declared war on whom?

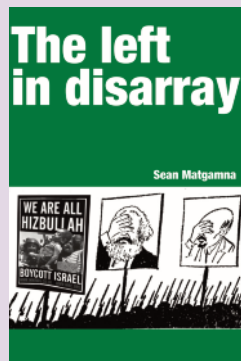
The CPs struck chords with this agitation, in Britain, for instance, because they told part of the truth (as they had in the earlier anti-fascist period told much of the truth about Germany).

In France, where the CP was vastly powerful, the Stalinists contributed to the defeatism that undermined the war against the German invaders. They tried to do the same in Britain. For a while the CPGB was able to whip up a strong labour movement opposition to the war, in the People’s Convention. That lasted until the fall of France in May-June 1940.

Those who left or were alienated would come back at the next turn in the road, in and after June 1941...

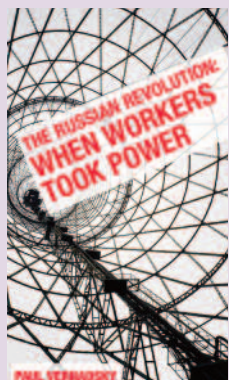
Japan would attack the US naval base in Honolulu, Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. Hitler would declare war on the USA four days later, on 11 December 1941.

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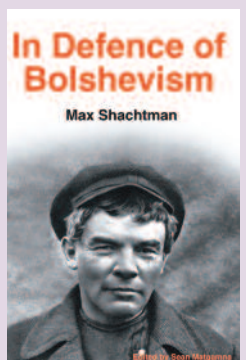
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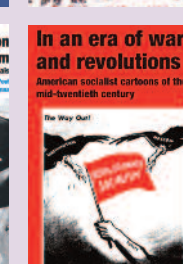
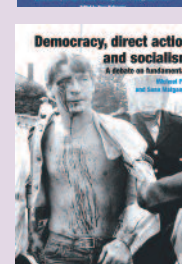
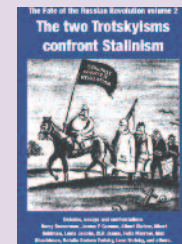
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