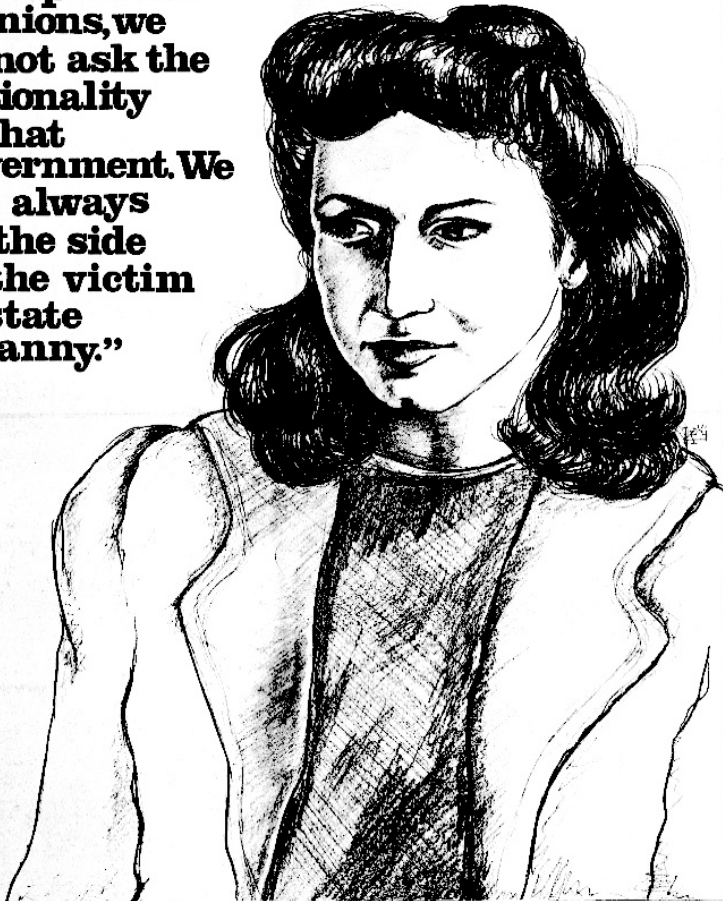


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**“When a government puts people in jail for their political opinions, we do not ask the nationality of that government. We are always on the side of the victim of state tyranny.”**



Marie Louise Berneri (1918-1948), anti-fascist militant and anarchist propagandist

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# THE ABOLITION OF PROPERTY, THE STATE AND IMPERIALISM



**MARIE  
LOUISE  
BERNERI**

## The Abolition of Property

*From 'War Commentary: For Anarchism', Mid-June 1944, London, UK*

In the Mid-March issue of War Commentary one of our readers asked us to explain more fully the views of the Anarchists on property. We answered him by reproducing short extracts from Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin and Tolstoy. From all of them it appeared clearly that Anarchists condemn property as being based on injustice and obtained through exploitation, oppression and violence. They condemned it further, as being “at once the consequence and the basis of the State” and having a corrupting influence on the privileged classes while the poor starve and are physically and morally crushed.

According to the Anarchists the first task of the revolution must be the abolition of property. Both the means of production and consumption goods must be expropriated and put at the disposal of the whole community.

How property is going to be abolished does not seem to be clear to many people. Some confusion has arisen in their minds because of the expressions used by revolutionary movements and the Anarchists in particular who advocate the seizure of the land and the factories by the workers. This seems to imply that property instead of being abolished is going to be transferred from one group of people to another.

When the Anarchists advocate the occupation of the factories by the workers and the seizure of the land by the peasants they do not mean that those workers should become the owners instead of the capitalists or the State, but that they should act as agents for the whole of society. After the revolution everything will belong to all — which comes to the same thing as saying that nothing will belong to anyone in particular.

When workers expropriate a factory they will not become a kind of shareholders, each owning 1/100th or 1/1000th part of the factory. The factory will not belong to them any more than to the miners or the agricultural labourers who may be working nearby; they will be merely running it for the whole of the community which meanwhile will provide them with the things they need.

If we said that the factories, and land, etc., should become the property of the workers (using the word in the sense it has been used up to now) we would be creating a new injustice. Property “is the right of using and abusing”; there is nothing which prevents a man from destroying his own house, and for years capitalists have destroyed whole crops of wheat, bananas, oranges, or coffee, or thrown fish back into the sea merely because it belonged to them and they could do what they wanted with it.

Eccentric ladies have their dogs, their personal belongings, their yachts, etc., destroyed after their death. According to the present conception of the word ‘property’, workers owning a factory would be able to destroy it if they wanted to, or destroy its products if they chose. This is a very unlikely hypothesis and there are other reasons for condemning property. Collective property is as illogical and unjust as private property. Everything created in society is the result of common labour. A factory which may have taken hundreds of workers to build, which possesses machines created by the efforts of generations of engineers cannot be said to belong to anyone in particular. If from one owner the property passes to a hundred, the injustice

## Other works by Marie Louise Berneri

- Chiang Kai-Shek and the Communists in China, War Commentary (1942)
- Italy After 1918 / The Rise of Fascism in Italy, War Commentary (1943)
- Workers in Stalin’s Russia, Freedom Press (1944)
- Journey Through Utopia, Routledge & Kegan Paul (1950); Beacon Press (1951); PM Press (2019)
- Neither East Nor West: Selected Writings, Freedom Press (1952)

## Works about M. L. B.

- Anarchism, Anti-Militarism, and the British Empire: the Case of War Commentary and the Freedom Defence Committee, by Eleanor Strangways (2025)
- Anarchism and the British Warfare State: The Prosecution of the War Commentary Anarchists, 1945, by Carissa Honeywell (2015)
- Maria Luisa Berneri Richards 1918-1949, by Antonio Senta (2019)



Marie Louise Berneri and Lilian Wolfe distributing War Commentary

the persecuted Jewish people but some of these Jews have survived and they could have told their tragic experience if anybody had been ready to listen to them. But nowadays human suffering does not count unless it is related in secret documents. The victims of Russia's senseless act whose sufferings make such good propaganda material for the US are now in DP [displaced persons] camps in Germany. They can die of starvation and despair; the world does not care, but they have achieved immortality in the published records and, supreme irony, they are used as fodder in the propaganda for another war.

### **Excerpt from 'A Constructive Policy'**

*From 'War Commentary', December 1940, London, UK*

[...] It is not by changing ministers — such guilty men! — or issuing declarations that fascism and capitalism will be conquered. The problem is more complex than that. We do not intend to add our voice to those who delude the workers that their “leaders” will get them out of the mess. The problems need a complete transformation in the present attitude of the working class. You cannot change the present regime while there is no revolutionary spirit, while the workers will not understand a few fundamental truths.

1. That workers and capitalists cannot have a common cause.
2. That imperialism is the prime cause of war, and the cause must be eradicated.
3. That governments, Tory and Labour, are always instruments of oppression, and that the workers must learn to do without them.
4. That parties reek power only for their own benefit — a small minority. Therefore all power must be seized and retained in the hands of syndicates which comprise the great majority of the men and women producers.

We cannot build until the working class gets rid of its illusions, its acceptance of bosses and faith in leaders. Our policy consists in educating it, in stimulating its class instinct, and teaching methods of struggle. It is a hard and long task, but to the people who prefer such expedient solutions as war, we would point out that the great world war which was to end war and safeguard democracy, only produced fascism and another war; that this war will doubtless produce other wars, while leaving untouched the underlying problems of the workers. Our way of refusing to attempt the futile task of patching up a rotten world, but of striving to build a new one, is not only constructive but is also the only way out.

would still be there.

Of course, the abolition of property in factories and land must be followed by its abolition in consumption goods, the abolition of money and the abolition of wages. Men value property today for the privileges it gives. Shareholders value their shares in a factory because of the profits they draw from them which allow them to live on a better scale than ordinary workers and give them a superior position in society. With the abolition of money and wages, and private property in consumers' goods, “owning” a factory would become a completely meaningless term.

The injustice of private property in the means of production is generally recognised, but many people try to draw a distinction between two kinds of property: the factories, land, etc., which would allow men to exploit other people's labour on one hand and the personal possessions like a house, cars, books, etc., on the other. Says our critic, “Surely you don't want a man's hammer or bicycle to belong to the whole of society?”

The answer is yes and no. There are obviously things which can't belong to several people; a tooth brush, for example, is rightly considered by people as an instrument they should have an exclusive privilege to use. But supposing hammers and bicycles were in very short supply; then it would be wrong for a man to say: “this hammer or bicycle belongs to me” and thereby deprive other men from using them. The same principle would apply to a house. There is nothing wrong in a family wanting to have a house to themselves; they are obviously entitled to comfort and privacy.

But supposing that after the revolution there were for a time a number of people without shelter, then it would be wrong for a man or a family to have a whole house to themselves and if they refused to share it with other members it would show that the old capitalist mode of thinking is still alive.

We want to abolish property altogether. It might at first seem just that a man should own a house, tools, bicycle or car because it is true that these possessions would not allow him to exploit his fellow workers but it is equally true that by owning these commodities he may be excluding other workers who have an equal claim to them. One cannot share everything and one will still say my bed when sleeping in it, my coat when wearing it but one will realize that one has no exclusive right to the bed or coat as long as other men go without.

During and after the revolution it will be the job of the communes or the distribution syndicates to distribute the food and other commodities amongst the population. They will start by collectivizing food, transport, clothes and other commodities and will distribute them as fairly as possible. But if there were a shortage of goods it should be the duty of each member, of the community to bring to the distribution what “belongs” to him so as to share it with others. If this were not done spontaneously, if a man possessed stores of food while the population starved there is no reason why the commune or the syndicate should not take the goods and distribute them amongst the population. If bicycles or cars were urgently needed they should be equally requisitioned. This is why we cannot accept the view that only the land and the factories should belong to all.

The method of consumption will undergo a change as radical as that of production. Things like cars, tools, books, records, will generally no longer be used by men individually, but will be shared by a group. There is no reason

why individuals should accumulate a great number of tools, books, etc., in their own house when they can borrow them from a communal centre. There is no reason why each man should have a car in his garage if he can borrow it, when he needs it, from the communal garage.

The lending library system could be applied to most commodities of life. If a family has guests it should be able to go to the communal centre and get the extra crockery, bedding, beds and chairs necessary to accommodate the guests; when these have left, the articles borrowed could be returned to the centre. Vacuum cleaners, washing machines, paint sprayers and a hundred other things could be equally borrowed every time they are needed. In this way even if the production of industrial goods does not expand so as to provide each individual with all the commodities he requires he will be able, nevertheless, to have access to them. The other advantage will be to cut down the amount of furniture and household articles in the house which generally take up a lot of space and complicate housekeeping.

To our minds, influenced by capitalist ideas, the abolition of property may seem rather disturbing. There is in many of us a reluctance to share what we have with others. The isolation of man in present-day society has created in him a strong individualistic feeling. This selfish attitude did not exist amongst savages or in primitive societies where men used to feel part of the community. As Kropotkin has abundantly shown in *Mutual Aid*, members of the same community shared all they had, food, clothes, houses, implements of work.

There is no doubt that, after the revolution, the work in common for the good of all, the daily contact with neighbours in factories and at home will give birth to a revival of feelings of fraternity amongst men. It is by no means unpleasant and one likes sharing what one has with friends. When friendly relations will exist amongst all men it will seem a natural thing to put everything one has in common.

One may remind sceptics that relations between men have undergone very deep changes through the ages and that there is no reason why the relation between men and things should not undergo equally deep ones. There were times in history when men thought that they had the right to possess slaves and do what they liked with their lives. This would seem repugnant to most men today (capitalists and politicians excepted). Man considered his wife as his personal property which he could treat as he wished. Now he tends to regard her as a companion and admit that she is free to think and act as she chooses. There is no reason to suppose that once capitalism, money and wages have been abolished our attitude towards property will not undergo a similar fundamental change so that the word will be rendered completely meaningless.

If we consider the documents published in Washington, as we shall consider those which Moscow intends to publish, it is not to wax indignant at the behaviour of any particular government. None of them has a record to be proud of. If Stalin made a pact with Hitler, Britain helped Nazism to get into power, and neither Russia nor America, neither France nor Britain, was in the least concerned with crushing Nazism but merely played the game they thought more suitable for their imperialist interests.

We said all this long before these documents were published, not because we were better informed, but because we had no reasons for concealing facts. Mr. Churchill, who is now so anxious that the documents should receive wide publicity, knew of them when he lavished his praises on Stalin. To describe the records as "an appalling story of cynical diplomatic duplicity such as few people in this country would have deemed possible," as Cummings does in the *News Chronicle*, is a gross exaggeration.

In fact these documents prove little that has not already been made public through other sources. They prove that the Soviet-German pact was an active alliance, i.e., that, while it lasted, these two countries helped one another by exchanging goods and by encouraging their respective territorial aggrandisements. This had already been revealed, in particular by Kravchenko, in his book *I Chose Freedom* (see *Freedom*, 15/11/47).

They show that Soviet and German leaders and diplomats exchanged congratulations, compliments and toasts. But didn't we have photographs of them shaking hands and smiling at one another? One could readily imagine that the usual compliments had been exchanged.

They show further that Litvinov was sacked and replaced by Molotov because the former was in favour of an anti-fascist alliance and a Jew, not a very suitable envoy to send to Germany. This also had been pointed out long ago.

The Soviet Government tried its best to make the pact palatable to the Russian people because, in the words of the German Ambassador in Moscow; in his report of Sept. 6th,

"The sudden alteration in the policy of the Soviet Government, after years of propaganda directed expressly against German aggressors, is still not very well understood by the population. Especially the statements of official agitators to the effect that Germany is no longer an aggressor run up against considerable doubt. The Soviet Government is doing everything to change the attitude of the population here towards Germany. The press is as though it had been transformed . . . In a judgment of conditions here the Soviet Government has always previously been able in a masterly fashion to influence the attitude of the population in the direction which it has desired, and it is not being sparing this time either of the necessary propaganda."

This also is no "revelation". The Russian Press and the testimony of several Russian exiles are there to prove that there was an immediate and thorough change of line.

The documents also give some information which is not of the kind to hit the headlines but which is perhaps more important than the more publicised one. In December, 1939, for example, when Hitler gave the order to expel thousands of Jews from German-occupied Poland into the Soviet sphere, the Russians sent the Jews back to German-held territory.

This will seem an incredible story to those who see in Stalin the defender of

## The Muddy War

*From 'Freedom: Anarchist Fortnightly', February 21, 1948, London, UK*

Whether or not it is a cold war, it is certainly a muddy one. Washington State Department has not been able to resist the temptation of having a good smack at Russia, and has published a number of German State documents concerning the relations between the Soviet Union and Germany in the period 1939-1941. These documents were seized by the American forces when they marched into Germany and have been kept on ice for nearly three years before being made public. Nor are all the documents being published now; we are given a selection, an hors d'oeuvre so to speak, and the rest are probably kept in reserve for even more propitious times.

We would like to avoid noticing this dirty business; we would rather deal with beautiful and inspiring examples of international solidarity but the task of a paper is to look at facts, however unpleasant and however much one despises the way in which they are presented. And indeed it is difficult to imagine anything more revolting than the use governments make of secret documents.

When a private individual holds a document which might compromise a person and he tries to use it for his own advantage, it is called blackmail and it is punished by law. But when a Government uses documents obtained by their informers, spies, and diplomats or by war and plunder and uses them to blackmail or blacken another government, it is called international politics.

We are not opposed to the publication of these documents, which are of great historical value, but we strongly condemn the use which is made of them. We also condemn all secret treaties, protocols and negotiations. It is ridiculous to talk of a democratic government when that same government, which is supposed to represent the wishes of the people, is able to take momentous steps in its foreign policy with the knowledge of only a selected few. The chief lesson to be learned by the publication of these documents is that nations are committed to alliances defensive or offensive of which they are completely ignorant.

But this is not the conclusion governments want people to reach by the publication of these secret documents. They are used either to blackmail the governments, in whose interest it is that they should remain secret, or to blacken these same governments and create a feeling of hostility among nations.

It is doubtful whether this is in fact a very effective method because, for each document in the hands of the Americans and detrimental to Russia, Moscow will probably bring out one which will smear either Washington or London. Mr. Bevin's wisdom in not allowing himself to be rushed into the publication of documents is probably dictated more by self-interest than by any feeling of discretion or magnanimity.

Already Moscow has hit back by stating that Britain and France did not wish to come to an arrangement with the Soviet Union in the negotiations which began in March 1939 and that their aim was to "get Germany and the Soviet Union to come to grips as soon as possible". Moscow also threatens to publish documents seized in Germany by the Red Army concerning the relations between Hitler's Germany and the Government of Britain, France and the US.

## What Are We Voting For?

*From 'War Commentary: For Anarchism', Dec.1941-Jan.1942, London, UK*

All left wing parties use parliamentary methods. Some of them like the Labour Party see in parliamentary activity the only means of changing society. Others, more to the left, see in elections and parliamentary action a means of putting forward their propaganda while recognising that more effective methods must be used if a change of regime is to be brought about. The Communists have till recently put up candidates at elections, the ILP [Independent Labour Party] has recently fought several by-elections, Pacifists have done the same and the American Trotskyists put up a candidate to the presidency, the SPGB [Socialist Party of Great Britain] found their propaganda on belief in parliamentary action. The Anarchists (and the Anti-Parliamentarian Communist Federation in Glasgow) alone declare that no progress can be achieved by using parliamentary methods.

Let us leave aside those reformists who believe that socialism can be achieved with a socialist majority in Parliament. Thirty years of social democratic failure all over the world should have shattered the illusions of the most obstinate. Let us consider the great number of well-meaning revolutionaries who believe that by taking part in elections, by having a few MP's [Members of Parliament] in Parliament their propaganda will be making more rapid progress. This is the attitude adopted by the ILP for example, who seem well satisfied with the results obtained at the recent by-elections they have fought. It is considered a great success that in a place like Lancaster where the ILP had 14 readers the ILP candidate should have obtained 5,418 votes. It is undeniable that these elections give the ILP a good opportunity to put forward its point of view (even if it is in a very attenuated form; Fenner Brockway's Charter was so vague and general as to be almost meaningless). But that the fighting of elections advance revolutionary propaganda is another matter altogether. The very fact of fighting an election is on the contrary a counter-revolutionary activity.

A party may fight an election while thinking that nothing short of direct action will bring about the revolution but it cannot say so to the people it is asking the vote from. The socialist candidate in order to obtain the vote of his future electors must ask them to believe that he will look after them when he is in Parliament. He perpetuates in them the belief that through Parliament and governments they can obtain a better way of life. Instead of taking the opportunity of the elections to educate the people, Socialists take part in the general doping.

The fact of putting up candidates does not help socialist propaganda but on the contrary, definitely harms it. The task of a socialist or revolutionary party should be to teach people to rely on themselves, to take their own initiative and see that it is carried out by their own strength. To ask for people's votes is to ask them to resign their own initiative, to put their trust in somebody who very often they do not even know and whom they will not be able to recall if he proves unworthy of the faith they have put in him. And who anyway is quite powerless when he does get into Parliament.

Revolutionaries should take part in the elections not in order to put up candidates but to educate the people. In France anarchists always took an active part in Parliamentary and municipal elections. Anarchist militants and

speakers during the electoral period addressed as many meetings as the most anxious candidate for election. But they did not say to the people "Vote for us and we shall bring you better wages, greater freedom, new roads, railways or a Post Office" as candidates always promise at every election and in every country ever since the parliamentary system was established. Anarchists took the opportunity given to them by the elections to put forward the most active anti-parliamentarian propaganda. They showed the people how politicians had always promised the people to defend their interests, but once in Parliament had been merely concerned with feathering their nest or with rising to government's posts. They showed how sincere militants had been corrupted by their access to power and after having been elected by the workers become their worst oppressors. They asked the workers to rely only on themselves and on their organizations instead of becoming the tools of the bourgeoisie by trying to use its institutions.

By-elections give a good opportunity to revolutionaries to expose the whole parliamentary system, the farce of democratic regime. Anarchists should destroy what faith people have left in parliaments and governments for when that faith no longer exists people will seek an alternative in the social revolution.

Our means for such work are small; conservative and labour candidates have plenty of money to spend on propaganda and on self-advertisement; but we can carry on our propaganda all the same. With handbills, with open-air meetings, by asking questions at electoral meetings we can put forward these fundamental revolutionary principles.

We refuse to take sides in the electoral struggle, all governments, conservative or socialist, exist to defend the interests of a minority. Socialist governments have been the tools of the capitalist class like the others and have often voted more reactionary measures than the tory governments themselves. Now we see labour MPs and ministers following Churchill and his reactionary friends like faithful dogs.

Higher wages and better conditions will not be obtained by MPs as a concession from the capitalist class, they will be the result of workers action and discontent. If the workers rely on their own strength and in that of their fellow workers and are prepared to fight with their own means of struggle they will very soon succeed in bringing the exploiting classes to their knees.

The aim of the workers should not be to elect new MPs but to get rid of the whole lot and build a society based on a free association of syndicates and communes.

The most conscious members of the working class must realise that unless they give the people an alternative to the "democratic" system, the masses, disgusted with conservative and labour politicians alike will turn to a dictator as they did in Italy and Germany.

lebensraum:

"Now of course there are some subtractions to make from that potential labour force. A certain number of boys, for instance, will want to stay in the services [To be prepared, we suppose, for the next war to end wars? - M. L. B.], and many women now in War jobs will want to quit industry and go back to their homes. But one fact is sure: we can't hope to solve this problem just by making subtractions. We can only solve it the other way, by making additions. We can only solve it by additions to our markets and our enterprises. We can only solve it by additions to the size of the American job, the breadth of the American horizon. We can solve it by Creating a new and more dynamic United States."

Scientific discoveries, progress in the technical field will be the factors which will create this "more dynamic US." And Life proceeds to give an idea of the shape of "Things to Come". Production of cars weighing 1,000 pounds, helicopters to become everyman's airplane, radio-telephones for cars, television in colour or even in three dimensions, electronic cooking and electronic control of the factory or home.

Life, wants America to reap full benefit from these inventions:

"If we try to keep ourselves locked up behind our oceans we shall fail in two ways. First, our domestic market will not prove big enough in the long run and so the inventions will not get developed — labour and industry might even oppose them. And, secondly, we would not be able to keep everybody at work. In order to bring about the new age we must, so to speak, open up the world. Instead of relying solely upon our own purchasing power we must find ways to increase the purchasing power of peoples outside of America. Basically, this means an enormous increase in the flow of foreign trade in both directions. It means that we must, at one and the same time, open up our own markets and build up the markets of others."

Of course Life is not thinking of dividends and profits for American capitalists. It wants to increase the purchasing power of peoples outside of America, a very noble purpose. The British have been increasing the purchasing powers of the Indians for over a century with the result that the majority of the population is dying of hunger. Life is also thinking of preparing a "home fit for heroes" for when the boys come home. "Only thus can we give them, not just a Government dole, but a chance to get ahead. Only thus can we offer them an Adventure great enough to justify the terrible struggle in which they are engaged."

What Life overlooks is that America will not be the only country which will want to draw a benefit from new inventions and modern machinery. Russia, Britain, the Dominions will all be anxious to build up markets, the already shrunken field of exploitation will be still smaller. America will have to eliminate its competitors and that is a job the boys will be sure to get. That of conquering new markets for American capitalists, of preserving the American empire with a strong army and navy.

For this it is necessary to make the American people empire-conscious, to inculcate in them the idea of their superiority, of the fact that a comfortable life is due to them. The American Press is certainly doing its bit towards it.

seamen should refuse to export food which even in times of famine continues to be exported (India, Ireland, Russia, Spain) as exports mean profits and capitalists are never willing to relinquish those.

What we must realise in Britain is that the Indian famine is not a matter for the Indians alone to solve. This is the time to demonstrate our solidarity to the Indian workers by all the means at our disposal. We must remember also that if it is their turn to starve today it may be ours tomorrow; the sooner we devise means to fight against famine the better.

### **The Yankee Peril**

*From 'War Commentary: For Anarchism', Mid-August 1943, London, UK*

As early as December 1939 we asked in War Commentary "will America rule the World?" and we suggested that if present tendencies continued the answer would be in the affirmative. Since then our fears of seeing American imperialism expand over the five continents have shown themselves to be well grounded. The Central and South American countries are slowly but systematically infiltrated by American capital, Canada and Australia are being drawn in her sphere, American soldiers are to be found in India. In North Africa General Eisenhower showed no intention of liberating the French Empire to hand it over to the French and he will probably not easily be moved from Italy.

Everywhere Americans rule by intriguing and corrupting. They buy Trade Union bureaucrats and generals, left-wing journalists and Roman Catholic priests. They are Franquists in Spain, Darlanists in North Africa, Badoglioists in Italy. Their intriguing is bare-faced; as people sure of their power they can afford to neglect to cover their unscrupulous actions. Roosevelt speeches, which still make all the good democrats gasp in admiration are the only concession to the principles of "freedom" and "democracy".

The Americans have all the qualities of conquerors. A ruling class which, at home, can force workers back to the factories with bayonets, can murder negroes by the hundred, can put forward such filthy propaganda as the film Mission to Moscow has given good proofs that it knows how to rule.

For this reason when we read in the American magazine Life (21/6/43) an editorial explaining that "in facing the future, the US must base its foreign policy upon enlightened self interest", we have good reason to feel a cold shiver down our spine.

The American ruling class realises that the end of the war will be followed by an economic crisis and mass unemployment and they have set their mind to follow the present war with an economic war such as has never been waged in history.

Life poses the problem:

"By 1944, if present plans are carried out, we will have a civilian labour force big enough to support 11,100,00 men in uniform, run the war industries, and supply all our civilian essentials. After the war we will have this big labour force on our hands, and we will have in addition 11,100,00 returning soldiers and sailors who expect their old jobs back, or better ones. That will make the most potent labour force in history. Let's remember that in the 1930's we couldn't keep a much smaller labour force busy."

And here is the solution advocated by Life, a policy of American

### **Man-Made Famines**

*From 'War Commentary: For Anarchism', Mid-November, 1943, London, UK*

The horrors of war, of destruction and carnage, have been surpassed by those of famine, by millions of skeletons swept by diseases and epidemics. Famines which were caused by floods and droughts pass unnoticed today but the world is shaken by famines of a magnitude hitherto unknown, caused by Governments for political reasons.

Our generation has witnessed famines both in Asia and in Europe which present all the characteristics of man-made famines; they are particularly revolting to man's conscience because all of them could have been avoided if the masses had not been at the mercy of their Governments. Eugene Lyons who witnessed the Russian famine of 1932-33 points out that its singularly macabre quality was due to the fact that the destruction and suffering which seemed a natural calamity was in fact man-made, artificially whipped up and that a word of command from Stalin could have stopped it: "It was as if, in the midst of a terrible volcanic eruption, one were to catch sight of someone turning a crank that kept the hot lava pouring over men and towns".

We have had, a few days ago, the privilege of catching a glimpse of the men who hold in their hands the fate of the Indian people. In the House of Commons thirty-five people were present at the debate on the famine in India. It was lunch time and MPs [Members of Parliament] don't like waiting for seats in the restaurant. Amery, secretary for India, arrived late (he had been securing tickets for his wife in the gallery). Pethick Lawrence delivered the speech he had prepared in answer to the not-yet delivered speech by Amery. He reminded the House that they were all MPs for India, a rather tactless point to make in the circumstances.

The people who "turn the crank" are chatting and gossiping in restaurants and clubs, Lord Linlithgow arriving from India has nothing to say on the situation there and goes to Buckingham Palace to receive the Knighthood of the Garter, Amery has to be given police protection on his way to the House and jokes are made about his small size but his ability as a pugilist. In Moscow, Stalin entertains American and English statesmen, the dinner begins at 8.30 p.m. and ends at 2.30 the following morning. According to a witness "The courses seemed endless, there were more than twenty toasts".

If politicians are not concerned, business men are even less so. If one only read The Chamber of Commerce Journal one would think that India is the most prosperous country in the world. Each issue informs the readers that new "progress" is being made. Says the October number:

"The war has given a great impetus to many Indian industries. New ones have been started and old industries have been put on a more stable basis. An up-to-date fruit canning factory, which will be able to produce 300 tons of canned fruits this year, has started work somewhere in Northern India. The new factory is for the time being concentrating on plums, peaches, pears and apricots — fruits which are available in large quantities in its vicinity."

The fruit is preserved in a syrup or sugar solution and can be kept "a considerable time". The review ends cheerfully: "With a plentiful supply of good fruits and sugar in the country it is reasonable to expect that the fruit canning industry will have a great future in India".

The November issue of The Chamber of Commerce Journal announces

that:

“The Commerce Department of the Government of India is evidently out to tell the world about the great post-war and present possibilities for development in India. The Government of India are publishing a series of pamphlets, brightly written, very informative and illustrated, about different aspects of Indian industries”.

Pamphlet No. 3 deals with the jute industry which is partly responsible for the famine, the cultivation of rice having had to be abandoned for that of jute, causing starvation in wide areas. That it was “worthwhile” is proved by the fact that “the exports of raw and manufactured jute constitute about one quarter of the total value of the Indian merchandise exported. In thousands of rupees the exports of jute in 1940 doubled by comparison with the previous year.”

The Press has not been able to ignore the Indian famine and every day newspapers carry figures about the number of deaths due to starvation or cholera. But we can be sure that famine is far more serious than we can gather from journalists’ reports. The Russian famine which took place after the forced collectivization of the land and which cost the Russian people from three to seven million lives, passed almost unnoticed at the time. It started in November 1932 and it was not till the 30th of March 1933 that the New York Times mentioned “widespread malnutrition”.

As in the case of India the publication of statistics was stopped and it was impossible to calculate the increase in death rate with any certainty. Journalists could abandon themselves freely to a little trick which consisted in calculating the deaths (due to executions for example) in one town and cabling them to their newspaper giving the impression that they were the figures for the whole of Russia. Reuter’s correspondent also sends precise information as to the number of deaths in the streets of Calcutta or in such and such hospital but neglects to talk about the corpses lining the railway trucks and accumulating around stations.

Correspondents are allowed to mention the hundreds of deaths in the cities as a screen for the hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of deaths which take place all over the country. The Government responsible for the famine has also the means of suppressing the news which by their intense horror might awaken the conscience of mankind.

As in the Russian famine scapegoats are found by the Government to cover itself. Stalin and his henchmen blamed the kulaks, on the one hand, and the bureaucracy on the other, expelling from the Party well-known Party members like Kamenev, and shooting high officials. Even the Church was made responsible. Bells were taken down, shrines were destroyed, priests and rabbis were rounded up and imprisoned. In the case of India everybody is blamed in turn, black-marketeers, hoarders, the local governments, Japanese agents and fifth-columnists. A few people attacked the Viceroy and the Daily Worker goes as far as asking Amery’s resignation. But Churchill, the Cabinet, the whole Government are not held responsible. The people responsible remain in high places and the privileged class they represent does not suffer. This is a characteristic of all modern famines. The rich people, the ruling class don’t starve and even go on enjoying a luxurious life. We see now in Russia the Communist leaders giving sumptuous receptions, in India while people die in the streets restaurant’s menus have eighteen courses on them, in

Spain smart restaurants offer their customers whole chickens after the soup, hors-d’oeuvres, fish, etc.

How do people react to so much suffering and injustice? They do not rebel as one would expect. While food shortage has always caused riots and revolts, mass starvation seems to have the effect of annihilating people’s will and strength to rebel. Riots do take place but not in proportion to those caused by occasional and short-lived food shortages. The Government obviously relies on this demoralization of the masses or it would never dare to provoke such catastrophies.

The first reaction of starving people is to emigrate from the countryside to the cities. Russia and India have seen vast movements of populations constantly in search of food. The second reaction is the abandonment of any kind of work, Indian peasants from the Jute areas for example refuse to go back. The Russian peasants fought against the main cause of the famine: the forced collectivization of the land by widespread sabotage. They slaughtered their cattle, horses and pigs on such a large scale that Stalin was forced to modify his plans for 100 per cent collectivization and make important concessions to the peasants. Faced with the menace of complete disruption of the economy of the country the Government had to give in.

The British Government is prepared to let hundreds of thousands and even perhaps, a few millions of Indians die of hunger. An over populated country like India can survive such an ordeal. But if the Government was threatened with a complete breakdown of the life of the country, agriculture, industry and transport it would try to appease the anger of the people. If peasants producing industrial crops, workers in the leather, paper, glass, lacquer and dye industries as well as in the mines and transport went on strike or used means of destruction similar to those of the Russian peasants one can be sure that the Government would find the necessary ships to bring food to India. Newspapers announce that India must be provided with 1,500,000 tons of wheat and rye to allow her to regain control of the position. They add that: “It will be for the British Government, in conjunction with the other United Nations, to decide if they can be released.” The only way the Indian masses have to force the Government to release that food is by threatening them to destroy those industries which are such a profitable source of investment to the readers of The Chamber of Commerce Journal and who are of no use whatsoever to the Indians who can’t afford boots, lacquered objects or canned peaches.

Other practical means of fighting against man-made famines not only in India but in all countries in which they occur would be: to picket restaurants which though probably using a small proportion of the total food consumption are an insult to the starving masses. To expropriate stocks of food either in the hands of hoarders or the Government and to set up Workers’ and Peasants’ Committees to ensure a fair distribution amongst the population. Looting of shops always takes place in periods of scarcity but it only benefits a minority of audacious men or women. The expropriation should be carried out on a large scale, not for the benefit of a few but of the whole community. Charity as organised by Lord Linlithgow, General Wavell and even the Cadbury Quakers is an insult. The masses don’t want crumbs from the loaded tables of the rich, but what is their natural right. They should take it whenever they have an opportunity. Indian dockers and