

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR and BRITISH LABOUR

In his recent review of Trotsky's "Where is Britain going?" Postgate questioned whether the American Civil War "led to" the British Reform Act of 1867. This, he says, is "a remarkable historical discovery for which some evidence should be produced." The following is an (all too rough) outline of the process I imagine Trotsky had in mind—T. A. J.

WHEN in 1861 the conflict between the Northern and Southern states of the American Union broke out into open war, the effect upon Britain was great and far-reaching. Cotton manufacture was then so much Britain's leading industry that any crisis affecting it produced consequences running through the whole of Britain. The Civil War cut off the supply of raw cotton and commenced a first-class economic crisis.

The economic life of Lancashire and of the U.S.A. had, it must

be remembered, grown side by side for a century. The trade that "made" Liverpool in the first place was the slave trade with the American continent, paid for by raw cotton. As Lancashire perfected its methods of manufacturing so the Southern States perfected their methods of producing the raw cotton. Ultimately the point was reached where Liverpool's shipping was wholly employed in bringing in American cotton, tobacco and sugar and taking out in return British manufactures. Lancashire, as a whole, had grown to pre-eminence on the cotton trade and for that trade—and the commercial ascendancy of Britain that went with it—the products of the Southern States were indispensable.

The blockade by the North of the Southern ports and the declaration of cotton contraband thus struck Britain a staggering blow.

Its effect upon British politics was instant and cumulative. From 1830, when the Reform Bill enfranchised the upper strata of the industrial capitalist class, the ruling classes in Britain had grown steadily more conservative. Those who had lost rather than gained by the Reform Bill expressed their antagonism in all the varying schools of Radicalism.

Chartism appeared, ran its course, and dissolved. The Trade Unions, after sundry vicissitudes, had become settled and permanent facts. And Chartism and Trades Unionism had each added its quota to the bitterness with which the ruling powers greeted any demand for further enfranchisement.

Dominant in British public policy at home and abroad was the Manchester school. The cotton crisis, therefore, did much more than interrupt the profits of cotton-capitalism. It displaced the centre of gravity of British politics. It knocked away the foundation pillar of the supremacy of textile capitalism and opened a way for the rise to dominance of the iron-and-steel capitalists (and their politics) of Birmingham.

This transference of British political power was completed by the subsequent history of the American struggle. The grounds of cleavage between the North and South were by no means solely the slavery question. There was involved the whole future development and policy of the U.S.A. The South looked to Europe (and primarily Lancashire) as a market for the products of its slave labour. It had no interest in the development of home manufacturers or mining. But for the Civil War and its consequences the U.S.A. would have continued to play economically the role of a British subsidiary.

To the struggling manufacturers of the North the vital need was some sort of protection from the "dumping" tactics of British manufacturers, and some chance in consequence to erect a "Lancashire" on the soil of the U.S.A.

On the issue of Free Trade or Protection, therefore, the division between North and South though less vocal was as fundamental and as irreconcilable as on the issue of slavery. When, with the southern ports blockaded, President Lincoln imposed (for revenue purposes) an import tax upon all goods coming into the U.S.A., his act had even greater effects upon subsequent history than his later war measure, the Emancipation proclamation. He had laid, without knowing it, the foundation for that series of "scientific" tariffs which American economists claim gave a starting-point for the rise of the U.S.A. to the economic dominance of the world.

The effects in Britain were plain in the conduct of the ruling class. The more, as Tories, they had denounced the idea of "Separation" in the case of Ireland or Poland the more they denounced the iniquity of the North in denying the right of the Southern States to secede. Loud demands were raised for the "recognition" of the Southern Confederacy and for intervention on its side. When commissioners despatched by the Southern Confederacy to secure "recognition" from Britain and the other Powers were taken by a U.S. warship from a British vessel a declaration of war was only narrowly averted.

And that it was averted was due more than anything to the massed protests of the proletariat—particularly of Lancashire.

Marx says, in the Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association (1864):—

"It was not the wisdom of the ruling-classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working-classes of England that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic."

The conduct of the workers of Lancashire was truly heroic. Flung into almost complete and utter destitution by the paralysis of the cotton-trade, they resisted every endeavour to incite them into violent agitation for the breaking of the Blockade, the recognition of the South and the crushing of the North. Even if it be conceded that their motive was chiefly sentimental and rooted in a hatred of slavery as such their heroism is in no wise abated thereby. And when in the end the "chivalrous" and "aristocratic" South surrendered to the plebeian but victorious North the British workers, particularly in Lancashire, had every reason for taking a personal pride in the victory.

Thus it was that, under the *form* of a conflict for and against the "slave-owners' rebellion" of the Southern States, there developed in Britain a *class* conflict in which the aristocracy and upper-bourgeoisie of Britain suffered a moral defeat in the fall and surrender of their protégés.

This fact had a direct bearing upon the events which followed—the growth of the Reform League and its agitation ending in the triumph of 1867.

It is well-known that the Reform Bill of 1830—granted as it was only from fear of an imminent revolution—enfranchised only the bourgeoisie. The town artisans and the proletariat generally not merely gained nothing, but actually lost in the suppression of those few cases where they had votes under the older regime. Chartism had emphasised this fact, put forward its demands, run its course and died. But there still remained, in more or less of activity, a number of Radical and Republican clubs and societies which more or less feebly agitated for further reform.

It had become a settled conviction by 1860 that no further Reform was possible, while Palmerston lived to lead the Whigs; and Disraeli's acute endeavour in '59 to induce the Tories to "scoop" the credit for what he saw to be inevitable proved premature. Matters were thus at a stalemate when the cotton-crisis once again set agitation aflame.

Their agitation received a backing from—and gave an impetus to—the development of more definitely and consciously working-class bodies.

In 1861 and 1862, Howell and Odger each raised the question of the extension of the franchise before the newly formed London Trades Council; at that time with little success. By 1866, however, Odger and Applegarth succeeded in winning over the Council to the support of the National Reform League's Demands and earlier in the same year a working-class organisation with the same object in view had been formed.

This "London Working-Men's Association" led by Geo. Potter (of the *Beehive*) had as its first object demonstrations in favour of the Reform Bill (Gladstone's) then (1866) before the House of Commons. Palmerston was dead and Gladstone as Leader of the House of Commons had bowed before the growing storm sufficiently to bring in (in the teeth of opposition from a section of his own party) a Reform Bill.

The measure, weak enough, was carried on its Second Reading by five votes only, and the government were defeated later on an amendment moved during the committee stage.

It was during the recess prior to the general election that occurred the famous Reform riots (1866) when a monster demonstration of London Radicals and Reformers led by the National Reform League and supported by Potter's group, marched to Hyde Park, and being refused admission, tore up half-a-mile of railings and broke in.

After this the new Government (Disraeli's) saw that a Reform Bill must be brought in and, moreover, that it was dangerous to

resist the demands of the Radicals. The Bill introduced by a Tory Government in February, '67, was by the time it passed in August of the same year so amended by the Radicals (Disraeli consenting) that it considerably bettered the measure upon which Gladstone had been defeated the year before.

It is clear that the ruling oligarchy in Britain found it necessary to open a safety-valve (in the form of an extension of the franchise) to prevent a revolutionary explosion. Can we trace any connection between this revolutionary temper and the fact and outcome of the American Civil War?

That the British workers were growing more "class-conscious" is evidenced by the formation of the International in 1864, in the rise of the "Model Unions," and the advance of trade-unionism generally during the same period. Similarly the tumultuous welcome given to Garibaldi on his arrival in London in 1864, was such as to give the Court serious concern—with the result that private pressure was brought to bear to induce him to abruptly curtail his stay.

The Hyde Park riots of 1867 thus were to contemporaries no isolated incident. They formed to reactionaries, along with the Sheffield "outrages" which produced the Commission of Inquiry into Trade Unions (1867) part of a general wave of "sedition, privy conspiracy, and rebellion" whose centre and core was—either the "Red" International or the Fenian Brotherhood.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood (commonly and affectionately known by its first title the "Fenian" Brotherhood) was first formed in 1852 by some young Ireland exiles of 1848 then sojourning in Paris and living in close contact with the Parisian Red Republican secret societies of that period.

Operating on an essentially Blanquist plan, Joseph Stephens and Edward O'Mahoney set to work to found a secret, oath-bound, military-revolutionary society which should, when it had gathered sufficient volume, and the time was ripe, be able to take the field as the army of the Irish Republic.

As a political force it counted for virtually nothing until the outbreak of the Civil War. Among the many unique features of that exceptionally innovating episode was the fact that the rebel South had at the outbreak of hostilities the best military establishment and the better supply of trained military commanders. The North had to improvise its armies by mass recruiting, and they were in far greater measure recruited from the towns and the proletarian population.

Among other special means of recruiting was the raising of an Irish Brigade (commanded by the '48 "rebel" T. F. Meagher). The South followed suit, and it was the fortune of war that the two Irish Brigades—with one '48 man in command of the Northern

and the two sons of another (John Mitchel) serving as officers with the Southern—should be brigaded opposite to each other at the critical battle of Chancellorsville (at which “Stonewall” Jackson was killed) and put each other out of commission as brigades for the rest of the war.

Irishmen in great numbers served on both sides during the war, and the opportunity of recruiting, drilling, arming and equipping the force of which they had dreamed was not lost by the leaders of the Brotherhood.

At home in Ireland the crisis of the war created an immense impression. For one thing it gave a new turn to emigration, stopping it, that is to say, except for able-bodied men willing to serve in the U.S. Army—a practice not then condemned by the Foreign Enlistments Act. Not a little recruiting for the Irish Republican Brotherhood was done under the camouflage of recruiting for the U.S.A.

The exploits of the Irish Brigades on either side, and of every commander with an Irish name (such as Sheridan) were all good propoganda for Irish Nationalism ; and Fenian journals began to appear and secure wide circulation.

When the war ended in 1865, and the armies were disbanded, the men and munitions thus liberated at once made Fenianism a first-class menace to the British Empire.

It is a noteworthy fact, that whatever its founders may have intended, Fenianism proved to have a peculiar attraction for the proletariat. It was so in Ireland when the Fenian newspaper the *Irish People*, barely held its own against the more moderate and constitutional Nationalist journal. It was still more so in the towns of Britain and America when (especially in the former) the *People* competed its rivals almost out of existence.

James Connolly quotes with approval the statement that :—

“Fenianism was regarded with unconcealed aversion, not to say deadly hatred, by not merely the landlords, and the ruling class, but by the Catholic clergy, the middle-class Catholics and the great majority of the farming classes. It was, in fact, only amongst the youngest and most intelligent of the labouring class, of the young men of the large towns and cities engaged in the humbler walks of mercantile life, of the artisan and working classes that it found favour.”

How great the menace seemed to the rulers of Britain was shown by their suppression of the *Irish People* and the arrests of the Fenian leaders at the end of 1864.

This served only to give the movement a fillip, and after April, '65, with the Civil War adding enormously to its resources Fenianism became hourly a greater menace to the British Government.

How far British Radical and Republican clubs were at the time used by the Irish in Britain as a camouflage for the organisation and

recruiting of the I.R.B., cannot at this date be defined with precision. All that we know for certain is that it was done and done systematically. The fact too, that when the crisis came several of the dramatic blows of Fenianism (in 1867) were struck on the soil of Britain proves that the alarm of the authorities was not altogether baseless.

It is true that in the end the long-deferred Fenian rising proved a fiasco. But that was at the end of '67, after the Reform Bill was passed. The fear of Fenianism and of its alliance with the British proletariat was a factor of prime importance in determining the attitude of Whig and Tory alike to the growing demand for the admission of workers to the franchise. And the influence of the Civil War in this movement and its profound reaction upon the contending classes in Britain stand out clearly.

P.S.—It is not for nothing that the song of May Day and the most popular amongst British Socialists, *The Red Flag*, was written by an ex-Fenian and is sung (despite its author's protests) to a tune made popular by the Civil War!