CHAPTER 9

The Personal, the Political, and Permanent Revolution: Ernest Mandel and the Conflicted Legacies of Trotskyism*

Biographies of revolutionary Marxists should not be written by the faint of heart. The difficulties are daunting. Which revolutionary tradition is to be given pride of place? Of many Marxisms, which will be extolled, which exposed? What balance will be struck between the personal and the political? This dilemma cannot be avoided by those who rightly place analytic weight on the public life of organisations and causes and yet understand, as well, how private experience affects not only the individual but the movements, ideas and developments he or she has influenced. Social history’s accent on the particular and its elaboration of context, political biography’s attention to structures, institutions and debates central to an individual’s life and intellectual history’s close examination of central ideas and the complexities of their refinement present a trilogy of challenges for any historian who aspires to write the life of someone who was both in history and dedicated to making history. As Jan Willem Stutje’s Ernest Mandel: A Rebel’s Dream Deferred (2009) shows, Ernest Mandel was just such a someone, an exceedingly important and troublingly complex figure.

Mandel’s Making: Fascism and the Fourth International

Benefitting from a cosmopolitan childhood, Mandel, born in Antwerp of Polish parents in 1923, nonetheless grew up with fascism. Relatives died in Auschwitz. His parents and brother escaped the Gestapo; living underground in Brussels, Mandel was arrested by the German secret police during a routine check of identity papers in 1942. At this point an active Trotskyist, young Mandel's revolutionary politics had been nurtured in the home, his father drawn to anti-Stalinist radicalism by the Moscow trials and the Spanish Civil War. Ernest

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was further inspired by Abraham Léon, a moving force in the small circle of Belgium's communist Left Opposition.

As a Jew and a revolutionary, Mandel's eventual capture by the Nazis was perhaps inevitable, yet he never relinquished the certainty that fascism would be defeated. His first arrest ended in Mandel breaking free from his captors: it was his father's ability to pay a ransom of 100,000 francs to corrupt police officials that almost certainly paved the way for his son's escape. Mandel used his freedom to good effect, building Trotskyism in tandem with the Resistance. Clandestine work took him across the Belgian border into France. There he first crossed paths with a Greek revolutionary known as Pablo whose later history would intersect decisively with Mandel's. In 1944, while engaged in the dangerously heroic act of leafleting German soldiers occupying Belgium, Mandel was again arrested and sentenced to two-and-a-half years of forced labour. Deported to Germany, he was bounced from one work camp to another. Mandel made a daring bid for his freedom, succeeding for a day, but was almost immediately recaptured. Cultivating political relations with some of those guarding him, Mandel discovered that many of his wardens were former German Social Democrats whose commitment to the Nazis was weak. Though he was fortunate to survive, Mandel suffered greatly. Emaciated and plagued by a number of serious health problems, he spent the winter of 1944 and 1945 at Camp Nieder-Roden, cutting reeds on frozen lakes before being hospitalised. At the end of March 1945, with the US Armed Forces overrunning Germany, Mandel's ordeal finally came to an end.

In the post-war period, Mandel dedicated himself to building and sustaining the Fourth International (FI), established by Trotsky in 1938, which aimed to draw together the global forces of Marxists who opposed both capitalism and Stalinism. Operating at first under conditions of illegality, the FI was subject to attack from its Soviet and Maoist opponents; its advocates ran the gauntlet of repression from one capitalist state to another. Important and contentious issues of principle divided the young movement. The 1950s saw the Fourth International fractured, with the significant American section (the SWP) aligned with others opposing the leadership of Mandel and Michel Raptis/Pablo. In 1953, Mandel and Pablo led what became known as the International Secretariat of the Fourth International (ISFI), while their opponents headed the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Many of the forces advocating Trotskyism reunited in 1963, as Mandel and Joseph Hansen of the SWP co-authored a programmatic statement on the dynamics of world revolution that staked out common ground on the nature and meaning of the Cuban Revolution and how to approach revolutionary struggle in colonial and Stalinist settings. When Pablo departed the now-renamed United Secretariat of