

American Imperialism (Book Review)

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American Imperialism, by Victor Perlo.
International Publishers, \$2.25.

The fight for peace and democracy in our country can be greatly strengthened through wide and effective use of *American Imperialism*. Based on V. I. Lenin's classic theoretical analysis, *Imperialism—The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Victor Perlo's book interprets concretely the rise and development of monopoly capitalism in the United States and its mode of operation on the world scene. It does not represent "the" fundamental theoretical analysis of U.S. imperialism which the Marxist movement in our country will yet produce; but it does provide us with an extremely useful ideological weapon in the democratic struggles of today.

American Imperialism simply had to be written during this period—if not by Perlo, then by some other progressive economist. The post-war dominance of the U.S. trusts and their unbridled drive toward global conquest and war made increasingly urgent the task of arming the democratic forces of our country with theoretical understanding of the nature and specific features of this most colossal and most predatory of all imperialist powers—and also of the "clay feet" which guarantee its destruction. This book provides both the general theoretical framework and the thorough factual documentation

necessary for accomplishing that task. It satisfies a long-felt need whose fulfillment could not be further delayed.

The comprehensive scope of *American Imperialism* is remarkable for a book of 256 pages. It traces the historic rise and world-wide expansion of U.S. imperialism (Chapters I-II). It reveals concretely the enormous super-profits which the U.S. trusts extract from the labor of oppressed peoples the world over, with special attention to the techniques of super-exploitation of the Negro people of the United States and the colonial and semi-colonial countries of Latin America (Chapters III-V). It outlines and documents the strategy, progress, and also the inherent bankruptcy of U.S. imperialism's program for world domination, especially its conquest of European markets and the colonial empires of European powers, and its war drive to suppress the rising national liberation movements, to hold down the developing proletarian revolution in Western Europe, and to destroy the Soviet Union and the new Peoples' Democracies (Chapters VI-X). Finally, it analyzes the oppressive impact of U.S. imperialism and its aggressive military program upon the people of our country—particularly the working class and the Negro people—and calls for "a great and representative peace mobilization" to "hasten and insure the final

victory of the democratic and peace-loving forces over the threat of fascism and war" (Chapter XI).

Merely to outline the broad scope of this book is to indicate that its analyses are either superficial or very tightly-written and compact. For the most part, the latter is the case. Indeed, *American Imperialism* might well be taken as a model in its economy of words, conciseness of style, and concreteness of documentation.

The first chapter on "The Rise of American Imperialism," for example, uses Lenin's five main characteristics of imperialism as the framework for tracing the historic development of monopoly capitalism in the United States. It analyzes and illustrates the military, economic and political methods of U.S. imperialist expansion; explains why the emerging U.S. imperialism had to rely mainly on semi-colonial forms of rule, rather than direct colonial domination; illustrates both patterns with a highly illuminating 6-page account of our country's relations to the Philippines since 1898; analyzes concretely the chief factors which led to the dominance of the United States among imperialist powers; interprets the decline of the world capitalist system in the period of its general crisis, and the corresponding rise of the Socialist system; and finally shows the enormity of the impossible task which the U.S. trusts and their government have now undertaken—"to stop the process of disintegration, to resuscitate the world system of imperialism and to patch up its weakest links." All this the first chapter does effectively in 26 pages! It is a masterful demonstration of concise, concrete, theoretical analysis; and it illustrates the compactness with which the entire book is written.

The fundamental merit of this book lies in its functional use of the Leninist theory of imperialism to illuminate the whole period in which we live. There is hardly any major *current* political development on the world scene which cannot be better understood in the light of analyses provided in *American Imperialism*. Reading this book one is impressed with the absolute indispensability of Marxist-Leninist theory in general, and of its application to U.S. imperialism in particular, for those who would understand and thus be in position to help shape the great historic changes now under way in our world.

The concreteness with which the development and role of U.S. imperialism are here documented makes this book a valuable arsenal of "facts to fight with." One finds here precise quantitative data, taken chiefly from reliable primary sources, on the decline of private foreign investments during recent decades; the demonstrated superiority of the Socialist system in iron and steel production; the far-flung industrial empires of Standard Oil, Anaconda Copper, United Fruit and other U.S. trusts; the composition and role of the U.S. financial oligarchy, and the trade and territorial empires which it dominates; amounts and rates of profit on foreign and domestic investments; together with hosts of related questions. One also finds here a wealth of specific documentation, likewise mostly from primary sources, on the clear-cut imperialist aims and effects of the Marshall Plan, North Atlantic Pact, and "Point Four"; on the intent and accomplishments of the U.S. trusts in grabbing up the material assets of their rival imperialists; and on the deliberate plans and definite steps taken by the United States to wage war on the Soviet Union

and its allies. The honest skeptic who finds it hard to believe that "our" government is the leader of a gigantic plot to conquer the world in the interest of corporate super-profits—who demands "facts, not opinions"—can generally be convinced on the basis of the abundant documentation which supports the analyses of *American Imperialism*.

One outstanding contribution of this book is its proof that "the original base of Wall Street's super-profits, and still a larger source than any single foreign country, is the oppression of the Negro people within the United States." Chapter IV documents the revealing and tremendously important fact—already picked up and used in the slogans of many progressive organizations—that U.S. trusts extract more than \$4,000,000,000 *extra* profits annually out of the labor of the Negro working people. Here is the material basis of the horrible record of Jim Crow oppression detailed in *We Charge Genocide*, the petition to the United Nations sponsored by the Civil Rights Congress.

Especially noteworthy in this connection is Perlo's concrete analysis of the disguised Northern counter-part of the Southern Negro-white wage differential—the common practice of assigning low classifications to skilled and difficult jobs in which Negro industrial workers predominate, and of rationalizing the low wages paid these workers on the ground of their arbitrarily determined "unskilled" classification.

The author goes on to draw certain political conclusions from his economic analysis—that the trade-union movement, in its own interest, must fight against the special oppression of Negro workers; that "collaboration with Jim Crow in the United States leads to col-

laboration with imperialist expansion and aggressive war abroad"; that "the oppression of the Negro people is the Achilles heel of United States imperialism"; and that "white workers must take the initiative" in developing close alliance between the mounting Negro liberation movement and the labor-progressive movement. But the *national* character of the Negro question is only implicit in this analysis. It is a major weakness that Perlo never draws the full political conclusion that the essence of the matter is U.S. imperialism's oppression of the Negro nation in the Black Belt, and that Negro liberation can ultimately be realized only along the path of self-determination.

American Imperialism is a frankly partisan book; it is *against* imperialist oppression and *for* the working class and peoples who are its victims. It differentiates sharply between the people of our country and the men of the trusts: "The American people are not imperialists. The imperialists are only the tiny group of those who own and control America. . . . They are not only different from, but they are the bitterest enemies of, the people of the United States." And it proceeds throughout mercilessly to expose imperialist decadence, deceit and plunder, and vigorously to champion the cause of people's liberation and freedom.

The reader of *American Imperialism* gains not only a fuller understanding of the decadence and murderous greed of the U.S. trusts, but also a firmer confidence in their coming defeat by the democratic forces of progress. One is impressed with the attention Perlo gives throughout to the inherent contradictions which ever more clearly sound the death-knell of the imperialist system, and to the progressive political

forces which they catapult into motion—especially the growing strength of the revolutionary proletariat in Europe, the mounting resistance of the working-class and Negro liberation movements in our own country, the tremendous upsurge of national-liberation struggles in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and the historic rise of the vast and powerful movement for peace on a world scale. It is notable that almost every chapter of *American Imperialism* concludes with emphasis on the inherent and fundamental weaknesses of the imperialist system and the growing democratic power of the people's resistance.

In this connection, one wishes that the final chapter on "Imperialism and the American People" had been extended to include a fuller and more concrete analysis of important recent developments in the labor movement, the Negro liberation movement and the peace movement of our country. One finds here an illuminating discussion of the depressing impact of imperialist decadence and parasitism upon the living standards of the United States people, the opportunist role being played by the labor bureaucracy and Social-Democracy, the growth of chauvinist reaction and the threat of war, and the primary responsibility of the people of the United States in the struggle for peace: "So long as Wall Street believes that it can count on the 7 per cent of the world's people living in this country, it is likely to thrust that 7 per cent into the disastrous course of fighting the rest of the world."

But only three or four brief paragraphs are devoted to the "fight back" movement among the United States workers, the Negro people and the growing peace coalition. It is an important weakness of *American Imperial-*

ism that neither this nor any other chapter provides a strong, clear outline of the developing progressive forces in our country which will yet fulfill their historic responsibility in the struggle against U.S. imperialism.

Not unrelated to this weakness is the complete failure of the book to describe and interpret the growth of the Communist movement on a world scale and in the United States as the guiding force in the developing struggle against U.S. imperialism. There are no more than eight or ten scattered references to the Communist movement in the entire book; and they consist chiefly of passing comments on the 1947 expulsion of Communists from European and Latin-American governments, the Communist vote in the 1945 French elections, and reactionary attacks upon Communists in our country and abroad. In only one brief sentence—describing the growing Philippine liberation struggles, "fortified by the increased role of organized workers under Communist leadership"—is there even a hint of the leading role of the Communist movement in the anti-imperialist struggle.

This is curious, indeed, especially in a book which starts from the premises of Lenin's *Imperialism*, proceeds devastatingly to expose the decadent nature and aggressive, expansionist role of U.S. imperialism, and calls for the building of a powerful anti-imperialist peace movement. It is a fundamental weakness that such a book practically ignores the indispensable role of the Communist movement in the United States and throughout the world in mobilizing and guiding the growing peoples' struggles against imperialist reaction.

This virtual black-out of the Com-

munist Party and its role is paralleled by (probably stems from) an even more basic theoretical weakness of *American Imperialism*—its failure to interpret Socialism as the inevitable successor of imperialist capitalism in the United States as in all the world. The last two sections of Chapter I almost do this—in their analysis of capitalist decay and Socialist advance in the period of general crisis, and of the enormous contradictions which confront U.S. imperialism as it “tries to stop the process of [capitalist] disintegration.” But here the analysis stops abruptly. The outcome of this historic conflict is left to the reader’s own deductions.

Perlo’s failure to go ahead and draw the full political conclusion from his analysis leaves out of the book, except by implication, the most fundamental insight any Marxist-Leninist analysis of imperialism should provide; namely, that the oppressive world system of imperialism is doomed, that it must and inevitably will be replaced completely by world Socialism, and that the sooner this is understood by the U.S. working class and its allies, the sooner will the peoples of the entire world move toward achievement of that freer and abundant society the material foundations of which are already at hand. The scientific proof and the popularization of this basic insight are especially needed in today’s ideological struggle in our country, where theories of “American exceptionalism” are constantly dinned into the minds of our people. That *American Imperialism* stops short of drawing this conclusion must be appraised as a fundamental weakness.

There are “missing” from this book several other relevant and important questions which one should expect to find discussed in a Marxist-Leninist study of U.S. imperialism. *First*, one finds here no mention of the special oppressive impact of U.S. imperialism on women and the family, or of the special role of women in the struggle against imperialist reaction. *Second*, Puerto Rico—the main direct colony of the United States, key nation in the whole struggle against U.S. imperialism in Latin America, and especially important because of the large Puerto Rican minority in New York—receives only incidental attention. In all the book there are but two brief summary paragraphs and seven or eight scattered, passing references to Puerto Rico; whereas the special importance of this island in the anti-imperialist struggle certainly warrants, at least, as substantial an analysis as that given to the Philippines. *Third*, the role of U.S. imperialism in the neighboring islands of the West Indies is hardly mentioned at all.

These shortcomings restrict the theoretical adequacy of *American Imperialism* and weaken its impact in the ideological struggle. At the same time, this book, with all its limitations, provides by far the most comprehensive analysis and the most thorough, up-to-date factual documentation of the development and world role of U.S. imperialism that are available to us today. It is an extremely valuable weapon in the struggle for democracy and peace. It should receive the widest distribution and use.