

ISOLATIONISM RECONSIDERED

Manfred Jonas, Isolationism in America, 1935-1941, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1966.

By Leonard P. Liggio

It must be stated at the outset that Jonas' work is a disappointment. Like so much recently published scholarship it is superficial. For the sake of general reader interest the material has not been treated with the exhaustive consideration that the topic deserves. There is a great deal of important material that is absent. Nevertheless, Jonas' book is clearly a major break-through. He has moved the consideration of the topic to the level of realism and responsibility from the general immaturity and prejudice which heretofore characterized the discussion of Isolationism. Despite his failure to understand or analyze his topic, Jonas' methodology has accepted Isolationism as a serious approach to world affairs. This will make it possible for scholars to fulfill what Jonas has neglected: an understanding and relevant analysis of the domestic phase of the opposition to twentieth century American imperialism, the reasons for its development and the causes of its ultimate failures.

Jonas indicates how Isolationism is rooted in the events of the American past. Specifically, the past was the First World War - its origins, the American intervention, and its consequences in the post-war political and economic systems. Historical Revisionism, Jonas emphasizes, undermined the official myths of the causation of the war and by a realistic analysis of the data explained the origins of the war and the American intervention, as well as the political and economic crisis of the post-war world. The first general critique was made by Albert Jay Nock in the Freeman. During the war Nock's editorial in the Nation (September, 1918) was singled out for seizure by the government for his analysis of the trade union move-

ment as an instrument of American imperialism. The outstanding social scientist, Professor Harry Elmer Barnes, by his emphasis upon the economic causation for the American intervention in the First World War, opened a new field of research into the role of American banking and corporate interests in foreign policy: for example, C. Hartley Grattan, Why We Fought; George Seldes, Iron, Blood and Profits; and Frank C. Hanighen and H. C. Engelbrecht, Merchants of Death. Harry Elmer Barnes noted in his introduction to Merchants of Death that "through their pressure to put the United States into the War these bankers brought about the results which have well nigh wrecked the contemporary world."

Jonas devotes a chapter to the Isolationist concentration upon the economic causes of international crisis. "The isolationist argument was coherent, logical, and self-contained: nations go to war for territorial gain or economic advantage." The contribution of Historical Revisionism, according to Jonas, was to give Isolationism a general doctrine of economic causation for political events. The works of Scott Nearing, Harry Elmer Barnes and Marine Major General Smedley D. Butler were particularly important. This general doctrine was applied to the analysis of twentieth century American political policy, foreign and domestic. There was the clear recognition that American imperialism was totally enmeshed in the overall world economic system. Charles Beard concluded that "powerful economic and political personalities seeking to avoid one domestic crisis after another by extending credits to the Allies, finally induced President Wilson to avoid an immediate economic collapse by leading this country into war." From this, isolationists understood that the major banks and corporations, according to Jonas, "Were among the leading supporters of a foreign policy designed to safeguard America's overseas economic interests. The line of action they favored risked more general entanglement in European and Asian affairs... meddling in world affairs merely insured profits for bankers and businessmen who were the chief beneficiaries, and therefore its chief advocates."

However, the nature of imperialism was clearly seen by only a few isolationists, even as events moved toward the Second Imperialist War. Quincy Howe in England Expects Every American To Do His Duty said that "the greatest Empire on earth and the world's strongest nation will be putting their combined support behind the status quo everywhere." Senator Burton K. Wheeler wrote to

Oswald Garrison Villard: "All of this talk about lining up with England and France to stop Fascism, by some radicals as well as conservatives . . . might possibly indicate that we were fighting over the colonies in Africa." But, the very terms "by some radicals as well as conservatives" indicates the incomplete nature of the analysis which was made of the system. Jonas, not unlike most other commentators on American foreign policy, fails to begin with the dominant feature of the twentieth century - imperialism. It is imperialism that must define all political forces in each country in the twentieth century; this is how left/right categories should be divided since that is how they divide objectively. Domestic policy is at best secondary compared to foreign policy - imperialism and anti-imperialism. The fact that in the United States almost all the political figures described their own political positions in the superficial terms of domestic rather than foreign policy encouraged the confusions in actual politics as well as in historical analysis. There is a single policy of American imperialism which has to do with the organization of the single domestic-international economy. There have been a number of works which clarify this issue: primarily the overall analysis of William Appleman Williams, and more recently the analysis of the pre-First World War period by Gabriel Kolko, the post-First World War era by Murray N. Rothbard, and the pre-Second World War period by Lloyd Gardner. These authorities indicate that the main thrust for government economic intervention domestically and internationally were and are the banking and related corporate interests, supported by intellectuals and journalists; these have been the conservatives. Those Americans opposed to imperialism were united on the view that interventions were for the benefit of the special interests, and differed only over whether the existing political institutions were sufficient to prevent or overthrow these interventions. The events of a quarter century have demonstrated the weakness of the analysis of those who considered the American Constitution and the party system as a bulwark against special interest. That this should have been believed at all is surprising considering the contributions destroying those myths by the New Historians, Charles Beard, Harry Elmer Barnes, etc. "By rejecting the traditional view of America's uniqueness," Jonas says of Beard, "and emphasizing the principle of economic causation, he was, at least by implication, pointing to the universality of the American experience and to its close relationship to European ideas and events."

As Jonas indicates, the major isolationist intellectuals

were Charles Beard, Harry Elmer Barnes, Albert J. Nock, Oswald Garrison Villard, Robert M. Hutchins and Norman Thomas. To name them, is to indicate that, except perhaps for Hutchins, Isolationism was a radical or left ideology. Isolationist politicians were also classified on the left, stemming as they did from the Populist Progressivism of the Midwest Republicans. Jonas notes that "the affinity between the tenets of Isolationism and the presuppositions underlying various forms of agrarian radicalism colored the Midwestern response to the wars in Europe and Asia." Gerald Nye fought against the Republican administrations of the 1920s, especially as an investigator of special interest relationships to the government. In 1934 the Nye committee launched investigations of the role of pro-war banking and business interests in determining foreign policy. Nye characterized the major New Deal legislation, NIRA, "as a bird of prey on the masses" which "encouraged monopoly." Borah opposed corporate influences in government as well as most Republican presidents and presidential candidates and opposed major New Deal measures as favorable to the corporatist interests. As chairman of the foreign relations committee (1925-33) he was the major advocate of recognition of the Soviet Union. Borah criticized the Central American interventions by the US as well as the interventions in China, especially the Hoover-Stimson policies.

In a very important analysis, "The Left and the Right," Jonas presents the seemingly conflicting viewpoints which unified in Isolationism. As traditional Isolationism is radical, the major question is how Isolationism has come to be considered a conservative position. Due to the cooption of most radicals by New Deal corporatism, the radicals who refused to betray the cause were then castigated as "reactionary", which label became a self-fulfilling prophecy when these radicals, barred from their former publishing outlets, found that only the publications with a conservative background would publish their radical writings on foreign policy. The New Deal corporatist system had been declared to be "radical" and the radical opponents of that system and its imperialist foreign policy were then declared to be "reactionary." It was in the wake of this development that the America First Committee was organized; that it was conservative was understandable once the radicals had been betrayed and abandoned. Many radicals, such as Villard, Beard and Barnes, cooperated with America First but never fully integrated with it; radical isolationism was missing from the American political scene and these people therefore remained iso-

lated: welcomed by the conservatives but hardly similar to them. In general, they found the conservatives lacking not merely on domestic issues, but on the basic issues of foreign policy and the tactics to be used.

The conservatives tended to take essentially moderate positions and to pursue very weak, "respectable," tactics. America First limited itself to influencing public opinion by publications, advertisements and rallies, but eschewed marches on Washington as being too extreme (1) and an embarrassment to the political opposition for which they operated as an auxiliary. Ultimately, America First considered entering politics directly as a new political force for peace, but this suggestion led to quick resignations by those traditionally connected to the major parties, not an unhealthy, though a too-long delayed, development. This weakness in tactics was partly caused by the moderation of the positions taken. Lacking any radical isolationist movement to spur them, they developed a defensive foreign policy stance. There was no attack on militarism, but rather an emphasis upon rearmament and preparedness. There was no clear critique of American imperialism due to the leadership role of people with imperialist interests, especially in Latin America. There was no clear repudiation of conscription, but a neutrality on this question which permitted the selective service renewal to pass by a single vote in the House in September, 1941. Had there been a truly radical isolationist movement in the United States, America First would have taken a much stronger stand on some of these issues. The Washington and New York chapters of America First had the advantage of traditional, i. e. radical, Isolationism in their leadership. In New York, the chapter was headed by John T. Flynn, premier radical journalist and investigator of the banking and munitions interests. Flynn made the New York chapter a strong voice of radical anti-imperialism.

A major aspect of Jonas' analysis of Isolationism is to emphasize the importance of the international law strain in that position. He identifies such legislators as Senators Borah and Johnson and Representative Fish as well as the international lawyers, John Bassett Moore and Edwin M. Borchard. They had doubts about the successive neutrality bills. Borah strongly opposed the concept of embargoes which would fulfill the League of Nations' system of economic sanctions against those seeking to change the imperialist status quo. Borah, Johnson, Fish, Moore and Borchard refused to support discretionary powers for the president as that would permit the president to provoke

war. As embargoes would support the League and aid one of the belligerents, Borah and others preferred to rely on "international law to keep American commerce within the accepted standards of neutral behavior." The Roosevelt administration placed an embargo on arms shipments to Spain during the Civil War although the act applied only to wars between states. In similar situations, the US had maintained normal relations with the government while not trading with the rebel forces; any placing of the government and the rebels on the same par was a form of recognition. The rebels in Spain were supplied by Germany and Italy, while England and France embargoed trade with both rivals, effectively depriving the Spanish government of trade while not disturbing the army rebels. Nye suggested that the New Deal had consistently applied the neutrality legislation to the benefit of the fascists. Hamilton Fish agreed with this view. Nye took the lead in the Senate in an attempt to prevent the administration's discriminatory measures against the Spanish Republic. Nye especially objected to the proposal to prohibit the export of medical supplies.

The summer of 1940 was a crucial point for American Isolationism. In May, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies was organized. By July, the major periodicals supporting Isolationism had changed sides; Common Sense, the New Republic which dropped John T. Flynn, and the Nation which dropped Oswald Garrison Villard. Soon after, the America First Committee was founded. While the radical intellectuals continued to write about the meaning of the war, the America First Committee tended to pursue different lines of analysis. Yet, a radical position continued to be articulated. Hugh Johnson said that the sole aim of the war was the British government's desire to "maintain her dominant Empire position with her own kinsmen and also over black, brown and yellow conquered and subject peoples in three continents." Senator Nye reminded Americans of the "other Britain" which was the "very acme of reaction, imperialism and exploitation." The Socialist party's national convention in New York in April 1940 reaffirmed its commitment to Isolationism and its foreign policy resolution, read into the Congressional Record by Hamilton Fish, declared that the Allies had "no purpose of overthrowing fascism except to replace it by a more desperate and brutal government, if need be, that would crush the economic demands of the German workers, and leave England and France free to pursue their star of profit."

The treatment of the isolationist analysis of US Far Eastern policy is limited in Jonas' work. But the US intervention in the war was the result of events centering in the Far East, and it was that intervention that Jonas feels ended the isolationist position. Yet, the suggested failure of isolationists to be concerned with the Far East is not explained or analyzed. Actually, there was a strong isolationist analysis of the Far East. Ralph Townsend, editor of Scribner's Commentator, centered his critiques on the New Deal's attempts "to make Americanism mean support for Chiang Kai-shek." Similarly, Norman Thomas was critical of "the Chinese dictator Chiang." Senator Borah was a close observer of Asian affairs and frequently criticized the Chiang regime as a front for Chinese and Anglo-American corporate interests. In essence, opposition to the Chiang regime represents a distinguishing mark of Isolationism.

Thus, Jonas's book joins the recent works of Wayne Cole and James J. Martin in providing, for the first time, scholarly insight into the much-neglected phenomenon of Isolationism before World War II. But much more needs to be done in exploring the pathways blazoned by these men.