Sir:

Your “Notes on the Truman Doctrine,” in the May-June issue, poses sharply the terrible dilemma facing many intellectuals—those who live in countries where some political choice, at least formally, is still possible—who are trying to find out what they can do in order not to become accomplices in the war now in preparation.

Only last night a group of us—including a young American visitor to Paris—were discussing the problem your article raises. We agreed with you that, rationally, the alternative appears fatal: to side either with Russia or America in the coming war. I admitted that, if this were really the only alternative, I would, to the extent I am a Marxist, choose the American side; and I buttressed this position if Kautskyian arguments; social progress called for supporting democratic capitalism against totalitarianism; under decadent capitalism, I can still denounce social evils and can fight against the system of government and exploitation which oppresses me; under Stalinism, I can do neither; hence the world rule of American capitalism seems to me a lesser evil than that of Russian totalitarianism. As a “Marxist,” I can thus demonstrate that the Americanization of the globe is a necessary historical stage on the road to world socialism.

In short, this solution seems to conform to Marx’s concept of the progress of social evolution, and nothing in his work can be invoked to support the contrary thesis: revolutionary defeatism in bourgeois countries, which would work to the advantage of Russia. Did not Marx himself always consider the winning of bourgeois-democratic liberties indispensable to developing that intellectual and political maturity which the working class needs if it is to make its own revolution?

When Kautsky called on Marxist doctrine to validate his “centrist” position in World War I, he was no less “Marxist” than was Lenin, who denounced him as a “renegade.” And yet, in the light of what we know today, it may be said that if Kautsky was in some ways more “Marxist” than his adversary, Lenin was more faithful to the real spirit of Marx’s teaching, since he had come to understand that the Marxian phrases and formulae by which 20th century world wars were justified had lost their validity, and that it had become necessary to take a defeatist position in every warring nation. If there were only two alternatives—the victory of Germany or of the Allies—Lenin stated that he would prefer the latter, that is, the defeat of his own country. But, since he was not a Marxist, Lenin made himself the champion of a cause lost in advance, and called for revolution, civil war, and fraternalization.

What could be more “Utopian”? And yet I think this line was the only one that corresponded if not to the “historical situation” at least to the basic significance of Marx’s teaching. Lenin called on the workers to betray their executioners and turn their arms against their masters. He wanted revolutionary struggle to triumph over imperialist war. How could his appeal have come to anything more than empty words?

But why all this about Lenin’s policy? Is that the Third Choice you recommend—that of pacifism and libertarian socialism? Obviously not. Your conclusion, and solution, is much more modest, nor is it at all revolutionary in the Marxist or Leninist sense of the term. You want to act by example, by individual action, by a “small-scale kind of activity” which “can be rewarding in itself.” In short, by practicing an ethic whose values are absolute.

I am not, as you know, a Leninist. I have cited one attitude of Lenin in order to show that he could, on occasion, be Utopian, as Marx too could. The Utopian socialist is he who, in every situation, stakes everything on awakening in men the most noble instincts, those most deserving of the adjective, “Promethean.” Marx put his stakes on a man at the very bottom of society, but also a man who is conscious of his degradation and who wants to save himself by struggle: in a word, he bet on the proletarian.

It was to this third conclusion that I finally came in the course of last night’s discussion; my friends could see only two “realistic” alternatives—support of Russia or of the USA. In your “Notes,” you indicate that you agree with me as to the necessity of refusing both these alternatives, but you base your position on pacifism rather than...
Marxism. Now it seems to me that, from the social (and hence the human) standpoint, a purely pacifist and defeatist attitude implies complicity in that evil which it pretends to resist, for in letting others alone, the absolute pacifist also lets evil alone; he does not prevent it. In contrast, the active revolutionary who calls on men to fight against war and the social institutions which produce it is acting effectively. You will reply that you consider your kind of activity—through reasoning and persuasion—as more effective than violent struggle. In that case, it seems to me, you should follow out the logic of your position, declare yourself a complete Tolstoyan, and break all ties with the social and historical milieu in which you live. Then, and only then, would your attitude have the value of example—one that could not be followed, of course: like Christ's whose inimitability drove Kierkegaard to despair.

I have been able to touch on, here, only a few surface aspects of the tragic situation that confronts us. Very soon I am bringing out an anthology of Marx under the title, "Selections for a Socialist Ethic," for which I have written a preface which will more fully indicate my point of view.

Paris, France

MAXIMILIEN RUBEL

—Lenin's revolutionary Third Camp appeal WAS mere "empty words" so far as the great capitalist countries were concerned. It struck fire in Russia precisely because Russia was a semi-colonial country where capitalism was immature. The only popular revolutionary movements since then have been in similarly backward countries: Spain and the Orient. But the problem facing Rubel in Paris and me in New York is not of colonial revolution. It is how to get from an industrialized mature capitalist society to a libertarian socialist society. Up to World War II, a reasonable case could be made out for the Third Camp position: Lenin's appeal had failed, but the crisis of capitalism had since then intensified, the next war would be far more shattering and destructive than World War I, the agony of the masses would create "revolutionary opportunities," etc. And in fact the war did turn out to be far more catastrophic, the agony of the masses was—and is—extreme, the social crisis much more severe. Yet the Third Camp not only failed to materialize, but was even less significant than in World War I.

Lenin's strategy puts all its bets on the masses awaking and acting, on their asserting themselves at some point. But can one reasonably see indications of such a tendency today? Is it not clear now that the very destructiveness of World War II, on which the Marxists depended to arouse the masses to revolt, had the opposite effect? (A look at Germany today will show what I mean.) As for the crisis of capitalism, it now appears that this leads to a centralization of State power, an intensification of nationalistic ideology, and the creation of a gigantic military machine—all of which abort popular revolutions (as conceived by the Marxist tradition) by controlling the economic crisis and by integrating the masses, through force and propaganda, into the State machinery.

Let's face it: the people, the masses are more inert politically today than possibly at any time since 1789. Rubel and I, and those who write for Politics and read it, are unable to communicate with them on a-political significant scale. Our reasoned arguments, our Utopian visions no longer arouse even opposition; they are simply beside the point, in terms of mass behavior. When we talk of "revolutionary mass action," we are talking through our hats. And when we talk of violent revolution, we are either ignoring the practical and ethical problems posed by new methods of warfare or else we are seeking a way to get the atom bomb and bacteriological warfare on "our" side.

Some other approach to politics, therefore, seems necessary. The best I can do is a kind of non-violent resistance which starts off from one's own values rather than The Masses, and which emphasizes personal (by which is NOT meant "individual") rather than historical relations. It is not very good, but it is better than anything else.

Rubel makes two common wrong assumptions about this position: (1) that it is passive and "lets evil alone," wherefore (2) it should logically lead to what he calls a "Tolstoyan" withdrawal from society ("break all ties with the social and historical milieu in which you live").

As to (1): except for certain religious pacifists—and by no means all religious pacifists—most American pacifists do not believe in letting evil alone (what has been called "passivism") but in fighting against it as hard as they can. That their resistance is non-violent does not mean that they do not resist. Gandhi's movement, for example, the chief instance of non-violent resistance on a large scale, certainly did not "let along" the evil of the British raj.

It follows that (2) the logic is not to cut one's ties to the world but on the contrary to multiply and strengthen them. Both the instances given of this alleged withdrawal seem defective: Christ spent most of his life not in the wilderness but in the towns as an active popular agitator; and Tolstoy involved himself to a remarkable degree in the big political and social issues of his time, raising money for starving peasants and the pacifist Doukhbors, seizing every opportunity, through interviews and articles, of making his voice heard throughout the world. (Not even Shaw was a more passionate writer of letters-to-the-editor!) "Standing on a pillar and going into a wilderness to live in a commune," Tolstoy once wrote to a disciple, "may be necessary for people for a time, but as a continual form, it is obviously a sin and a foolishness. To live a pure, holy life on a pillar or in a commune is impossible, because man is deprived of one-half of life: communion with the world, without which his life has no sense." (Quoted in Ernest J. Simmons' "Leo Tolstoy," p. 545.)

There are serious, even agonizing objections to non-violent resistance as a substitute for the Marxian class struggle. (For example, if one is struck with how much more favorable the situation was in 1917 to Lenin's approach than it is in 1947, the same thought occurs to one in comparing Tolstoy's age with our own.) But they are not those outlined above, which are the ones usually brought up (usually also in a more dogmatic and acidulous manner than M. Rubel's pleasantly reasonable communication) by those of the Marxist persuasion.

—D.M.
Crisis in Spring

The world will be even hungrier in 1948 than it was in 1947. The crisis will come in the coming year, many in Europe and Asia will die from the direct or indirect result for my family. Last weeks we got some packets from our friends abroad will find a way to help us by "adopting" one of these families.

We always have European families who are not being taken care of properly by the government relief. The winter in Austria this year is not so very cold and we are sure to come through with the food situation a little better; ago, we have had a very hard time. How can I explain to you, dear Friends, the joy of my family. The packets were condensed at news of famine, near-famine, and your readers help make our situation a little kindly. You may imagine the joy of my family. The packets were condensed with TB. His advice: to rest (how could a housewife manage?) and making up and sending their own packages to their adoptee. This has been used for CARE clothing packages contributed by our readers, for medicines, and other types of commercial packages, for postage for used clothing and regular help your readers have given our children. Thanks kindly people in Booneville, Madison 5 Wise, and New York.

No one need be surprised at news of famine, near-famine, and I go to work daily with two slais off dry bread. Only you and your readers help make our situation a little kindly. You, dear Friends, have brought to an action. (Oct. 23, 1947) 

Again we have to thank your readers for so much! But first some better; ago, we have had a very hard time. How can I explain how everyone who contributed did so by "adopting" a family and your readers help make our situation a little kindly. You, dear Friends, have brought to an action. (Oct. 23, 1947)