

War and Revolution: 1914–1917

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We are publishing here the text of a lecture delivered Saturday, April 8 by Nick Beams, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. This is the third in a series of five international online lectures being presented by the International Committee of the Fourth International to mark the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution. To register for the lecture series, visit wsws.org/1917.

The axis of my lecture today on War and Revolution: 1914–1917 is a very important point made by David North in opening this series of lectures.

In point 7 of his 10 reasons why the Russian Revolution should be studied, he made the following observation:

“The Russian Revolution demands serious study as a critical episode in the development of scientific social thought. The historical achievement of the Bolsheviks in 1917 both demonstrated and actualised the essential relationship between scientific materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice.”

This approach is vital for three interconnected reasons:

First, a materialist approach is the key to understanding the nature of World War I, its origins, underlying causes, and enduring significance and relevance for our times.

Second, it enables us to locate the objective causes of the Russian Revolution arising out of the very transformations in global capitalism which had produced the war.

Third, it enables us to grasp the essential content of the revolutionary strategy, developed above all by Lenin, which resulted in the successful conquest of power by the working class, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks in November 1917.

The points made here, in somewhat abstract form, will, I hope, become clear as we trace the course of events themselves and Lenin’s political analysis.

The objective causes of World War I

Let us turn to the question of World War I itself. More than 100 years after its outbreak on August 4, 1914 the question of its origin remains controversial. The reason is that this issue is of direct relevance for the analysis of contemporary events.

Roughly speaking there are two contending positions—that of Marxism and various forms of bourgeois liberal scholarship.

The Marxist analysis, to summarise it in the broadest terms, is that the war was the outcome of conflicts, rooted in an objective and irresolvable contradiction of the capitalist mode of production: that between the global character of the economy and the nation-state system in which the profit system is grounded.

The opposing theories boil down to the conception that the war arose out of the political mistakes, miscalculations and misjudgements of various bourgeois politicians and it could somehow have been averted if only wiser heads had prevailed.

Political issues are immediately bound up with these opposed assessments. If the Marxist analysis is correct, then what immediately follows is that there can be no end to war and the threat of mass destruction without ending the capitalist private profit and nation-state system and creating a new social and economic order.

This is why from the very outset, bourgeois politicians, having presided over the greatest destruction in human history brought by four years of war, sought to absolve themselves and the capitalist system over which they presided from any responsibility. It arose almost inadvertently, according to the British wartime Prime Minister Lloyd George. The war was something into which the great powers “glided, or rather staggered and stumbled.” The nations “slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war.”[1]

Bourgeois historians have followed in the wake of the capitalist politicians, sparing no effort in attempting to repudiate the Marxist analysis of World War I as a violent eruption of the contradictions of the world capitalist system. According to the British historian Niall Ferguson, for example, there is scarcely any evidence that businessmen wanted war; in fact, they were fearful of its consequences. Therefore, he insists, the Marxist interpretation of the war’s origins “can be consigned to the rubbish bin of history, along with most of the regimes which fostered it.”[2] One could respond that no businessman wants recessions and economic crises, but they happen.

If it was all a product of mistakes, miscalculations and misjudgements, then why, barely two decades after the “war to end all wars,” did an even bigger catastrophe erupt in the form of World War II in 1939? And why is the world today facing a situation which bears a striking resemblance to that which led to both world wars—innumerable flashpoints, in Eastern Europe, the South China Sea, Korea, the Middle East, to name but a few, and rising tensions between the major capitalist powers?

Marxism bases its analysis of war on the dictum advanced by the German theoretician Clausewitz in the 19th century: that war is the continuation of politics by other means.

What then were the political relations which existed in the period leading up to the outbreak of World War I out of which it arose?

They can only be grasped through a scientific, that is, materialist analysis which locates political relations, in the final analysis, in the economic developments of the capitalist economy.

Capitalist politicians, of course, make decisions, including the decision to go to war. There is no economic law which says that war must break out on such and such a day.

But their decisions are shaped by the political and economic framework in which they work, through which they seek to advance the interests of the capitalist nation-states they lead. At a certain point, however desirable or even undesirable it may be, the decision to go to war becomes the least worst option that confronts them.

If we take a broad view, the period leading up to the outbreak of World War I divides into two distinct epochs.

The great French Revolution of 1789–93 opened up a new historical epoch: the overthrow of the outmoded feudal regimes, clearing the way for the development of capitalist nation-states.

The period from 1789 down to 1871 saw the establishment, through a series of national wars and revolutions, of the modern-day framework of capitalist nation-states, culminating in the founding of the German national state by Bismarck at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war.

Together with the American Civil War, which ended in victory for the

industrial north, these national states provided a mighty springboard for the development of the productive forces under capitalism. However, this very process gave birth to a new epoch.

The last quarter of the 19th century and the opening decade of the 20th were characterised not by national wars against the remnants of feudal absolutism but by the struggle for colonies by the rising capitalist great powers. Africa, for example, had hardly started to be colonised in 1875. In the 25 years to the end of the century, however, it had been almost completely carved up by Britain, France, Germany and Belgium.

The political structure of the world was being transformed by these economic developments. In the first half of the 19th century, Great Britain had been the dominant global capitalist power. It was the workshop of the world and ruled the waves.

But new rivals were emerging: on the European continent in the form of Germany, undergoing vast industrialisation, in the East, Japan, and in the West, the United States, which made its entry into the scramble for colonies in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the subsequent annexation and subjugation of the Philippines.

Each of these capitalist powers was seeking, to use the phrase developed in Germany, its “place in the sun.” But in doing so they ran up against each other.

At one point a German diplomat asked one of his British counterparts where Her Majesty’s Government would not oppose the establishment of German colonies. The British diplomat replied that Whitehall was perfectly amenable to the setting up of German colonies, provided they were not contiguous with or between two British colonies. In the other words, the German diplomat replied: “Nowhere.”

Tensions between the capitalist great powers were rising. Britain and France almost went to war in the so-called Fashoda incident in 1898 when their armed forces confronted each in the upper Nile.

A row erupted when the German Kaiser expressed his support for the Boers in South Africa. The Balkans, under the domination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were becoming a tinder box, seething with national opposition to Austrian rule, a conflict in which Russia had a direct stake as it sought to advance its interests to the west.

In the government offices and chancelleries, the implications of this new period were being assessed.

In 1907, an under-secretary in the British Foreign Office, Eyre Crowe, produced an extensive memorandum for Foreign Secretary Lord Grey. Crowe was tasked with making an assessment of whether, under conditions where its economy and influence were rapidly expanding, Germany’s intentions were peaceful or militaristic.

He concluded that in the end it did not matter because the very development of Germany and its expanding global interests threatened the British Empire. Therefore, whatever assessment was made of Germany’s intentions, Britain, had to prepare for war. That war broke out just seven years later.

The immediate event which set off the Great War of 1914—the assassination by a Serbian nationalist of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on June 28—was an accident. What followed was not.

The Austrian regime, ruling over an empire in central and southeastern Europe, feared its break-up. It was determined to crush rising nationalist opposition in the Balkans spearheaded by Serbia and backed by an even bigger threat in the form of Russia. It issued a series of impossible demands to Serbia over the investigation of the assassination, aimed at provoking war.

The war may have been restricted to a local skirmish had it not been for the fact that the Austrian situation was intertwined with the economic and strategic interests of all the European great powers.

In Berlin, the Hohenzollern regime issued what amounted to a “blank cheque” to its Austrian ally to take all necessary action against Serbia, even though that may lead to a war with Russia. According to an official

government statement, if the Serbs, aided by Russia and France, had been allowed to go on endangering the stability of the Austrian monarchy this would weaken the position of Germany. Vital economic interests were also at stake.

Looking back in 1917, the German politician Gustav Stresemann summed up the view in the powerful industrial circles for which he spoke. Germany had seen “others conquer worlds,” a world “under the sceptre of others” where “our economic breath of life” was becoming increasingly restricted.[3]

No less vital issues were at stake for France in its support for Russia in the conflict with Germany. The annexation by Germany of the province of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 gave rise, as Marx had perceptively predicted, to an alliance between France and Russia in which the two would arm against Germany.

In the conflict between Germany and Russia, France could not stay neutral because, as the French President Poincaré later explained, the break-up of the alliance that had been in place for a quarter of a century would “leave us in isolation and at the mercy of our rivals.”[4]

Britain was likewise confronted with vital strategic and economic issues. Its policy was based on preserving the balance of power in Europe, to ensure that no single power or group of powers was able to challenge its global hegemony, based on its empire—above all the plunder of India.

In a remarkably candid assessment, the then first lord of the admiralty, Winston Churchill, summed up its position during a 1913–14 debate on naval expenditure:

“We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.”[5]

Accordingly, after some equivocation, Britain decided to support France and went to war against Germany.

The real war aims, of course, were never stated. How can a government declare to its population that it is sending the flower of its youth to die and be maimed on the battlefields in the interest of profits, the acquisition of resources, colonies and markets? The great powers sought to cover over the real motivations with an unending stream of lies issued through the mass media.

In Germany, the war was proclaimed to be for the “defence of the fatherland,” to maintain German culture and economy against the barbarism of Russia.

France declared it was going to war to defend the ideals of French political life, the legacy of the French Revolution—liberty and equality—against Prussian autocracy, notwithstanding the fact that it was allied with the despotic tsarist regime.

Britain declared it had entered the war to defend the neutrality of “little Belgium,” so grossly violated by the “Huns,” despite the fact that it would have done the same itself.

And when the United States entered the war in April 1917, to defend its own strategic and financial interests, it added to this mountain of lies by declaring that the war was to “make the world safe for democracy.”

The betrayal of the Second International

The outbreak of the war did not come as a surprise to the Marxist movement. In fact it had been foreshadowed as far back as 1887 by Frederick Engels.

The only war left to be waged by Prussia-Germany, he wrote, would be a world war, the violence of which would be of hitherto unimaginable proportions.

“Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other’s throats and in the process they will strip Europe bare than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent: famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism, both of the armies and the people, in the wake of

acute misery, irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in universal bankruptcy collapse of the old states and their conventional political wisdom to the extent that crowns will roll into the gutters by the dozen.”

It was impossible to foresee how the war would end and who would be the victor, he continued. “Only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class.”[6]

The Second International, comprised of the social-democratic parties proclaiming adherence to Marxism, had charted the rise of great power rivalries and tensions and pointed to the dangers of war, arising from the struggle for markets and profits.

But if the outbreak of war itself was not a surprise, then the reaction of the leading parties of the International was a shock.

On August 4, 1914, as German troops marched into Belgium with the aim of conquering France, the parliamentary representatives of the German SPD, the leading party of the International, voted unanimously in favour of war credits. There were 14 in opposition out of the 92 but they abided by party discipline in the Reichstag vote. The French socialists followed suit, declaring support for their own nation.

These decisions were in complete contravention of resolutions passed at congresses of the Second International. In 1907, at a congress held in Stuttgart, Germany, the International had issued a resolution declaring it was the duty of all parties to “exert every effort” to prevent war by the means they considered necessary.

The resolution then stipulated:

“Should war break out nonetheless, it is their duty to intervene in favour of its speedy termination, and to do all in their power to utilise the economic and political crisis caused by the war to rouse the people and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.”[7]

The Basle congress of 1912, held as war clouds were gathering, strengthened the resolution. It retained the Stuttgart phrasing but then referred to the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1905 to make even clearer what was meant.

Lenin’s response to the war was grounded in the analysis developed in the years preceding its outbreak. It was an imperialist war for colonies and profits.

From the outset, Lenin insisted that the betrayal of the Second International meant it was dead. It was necessary to break from it politically, ideologically and organisationally.

Against all attempts to cover up the significance of what had happened, the collapse “had to be recognised and its causes understood, so as to make it possible to build up a new and more lasting unity of the workers of all countries.”

Lenin and revolutionary defeatism

Lenin’s strategical line for the building of a new, Third International, was summed up in the perspective “turn the imperialist war into a civil war” enunciated in the aftermath of the war’s outbreak.

“The conversion of the present imperialist war into a civil war is the only correct proletarian slogan, one that follows from the existence of the Commune, and outlined in the Basle resolution (1912); it has been dictated by all the conditions of an imperialist war between highly developed bourgeois countries,” a statement entitled *The War and Russian Social Democracy* issued in November 1914 declared.[8]

All of Lenin’s work over the next period, in the lead up to, and in the course of the Russian Revolution, culminating in the conquest of political power in October 1917, was directed to carrying out this perspective, not simply, it must be emphasised, in Russia, but on an international scale.

The very character of the war, a world war, dragging in workers of every country into the maelstrom of death and destruction, meant that the strategy and tactics of the proletariat could only be developed on an international scale and on the basis of a common perspective. As Trotsky

was to later remark, August 1914 sounded the death knell of all national programs.

Before examining the many different sides and aspects of Lenin’s work, let me dispel some of the misconceptions about what the slogan “turn the imperialist war into a civil war” actually meant.

It was not a radical phrase. Lenin, above all, was against this type of petty-bourgeois politics so characteristic of anarchist, semi-anarchist and syndicalist tendencies—loud declamations of radical action.

It did not mean going into the street and proclaiming the necessity for civil war. Nor did it mean engaging in sabotage or other such actions—the “blowing up of bridges” as Lenin once put it—in order to deepen the crisis by artificial means.

It was the elaboration of a line of political work to make clear to the international working class, through propaganda, education and agitation, the historic significance of the war and the revolutionary tasks that would rapidly confront it.

How far removed was this perspective from radical phrase-mongering can be seen from a resolution authored by Lenin in March 1915 where he pointed to the first steps toward converting the imperialist war into a civil war. These should include: 1) an absolute refusal to vote for war credits; 2) a complete break with the policy of class truce; 3) the formation of an underground organisation where governments abolished constitutional liberties and introduced martial law; 4) support for fraternisation between the soldiers of the belligerent nations; 5) support for every kind of revolutionary mass action by the working class.[9]

Lenin clearly recognised that such revolutionary activity could weaken the country that was waging war and lead to its defeat. However, a proletarian could not deal a class blow against his “own” government, or hold out a hand to the worker of another country who was at war with “our side” without contributing to the disintegration and defeat of his “own” imperialist great power.[10]

The nature of imperialism

The elaboration of the strategy of revolutionary defeatism, as opposed to defencism, of turning the imperialist war into a civil war, was grounded on a scientific analysis of the nature of imperialism.

The question of imperialism had been under discussion both within the ranks of the Marxist movement and more broadly in the period leading up to the war.

In 1902, in the aftermath of the Boer War, the English social liberal John Hobson published a highly influential book, *Imperialism: A Study*.

The term imperialism was not new. But in the past it had referred to the consolidation of a strong national state. Hobson drew out that the “new imperialism” differed from the old in that it involved “theory and practice of competing empires” and the dominance of finance capital over trading interests. This led to the growth of financial parasitism in which wealth was accumulated not so much through manufacture and trade but via an enormous tribute drawn from colonies and dependencies and the rise of a financial aristocracy using its vast wealth to bribe the lower classes into acquiescence to its rule.

In 1910, the Austrian Marxist Rudolf Hilferding published his work *Finance Capital* in which he sought to extend Marx’s analysis to take account of the enormous growth of finance that had taken place since his death.

“No understanding of present-day economic tendencies, and hence no kind of scientific economics or politics is possible without a knowledge of the laws and functioning of finance capital,” he wrote.[11]

These two works were a major influence on Lenin as he sought to provide the theoretical foundation for his perspective. He was particularly drawn to Hobson’s analysis of financial parasitism and the conclusions arrived at by Hilferding of the impact of finance capital on politics.

Hilferding had drawn out that the domination of finance capital spelled the end of the liberal bourgeois politics of the 19th century based on free

competition and increasing democratisation. Finance capital had to fashion a new ideology to meet its needs. “This ideology ... is completely opposed to that of liberalism. Finance capital does not want freedom, but domination.”

Whereas the old liberalism had opposed international power politics, finance capital demands a strong state “which can intervene in every corner of the globe and transform the whole world into a sphere of investment.”[12]

This determined the politics of every great power, whether it took the form of a democratic republic or an absolutist regime. The politics of finance capital was, as Lenin put it, reaction “all down the line.”

In his work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which he had been working on throughout 1915, Lenin drew together all the strands of the analysis he had been developing from the outbreak of the war. Through the presentation of data he laid out the character of the new epoch, showing how the war was the outcome of the predatory drive of finance capital for markets, profits and colonies.

Like all great Marxist works, Lenin’s *Imperialism* is a polemic. It is directed against the leading pre-war theoretician of German social democracy, Karl Kautsky, who played the central role in providing the theoretical justifications for social chauvinism.

According to Kautsky, imperialism did not arise from a definite stage or phase in the development of capitalism but was simply the “preferred” policy of sections of the bourgeoisie consisting of the striving by industrial nations to bring large areas of agrarian territory under their control.

This definition passed over the central feature of imperialism which was not the role of industrial but finance capital.

Moreover, if imperialism was simply a “preferred” policy and therefore not rooted in objective developments in the capitalist economy, then what followed was that the politics of the working-class movement could be directed toward seeking an alliance with one or other section of the bourgeoisie which “preferred” another policy.

Kautsky’s definitions had one central political purpose: to provide the justification for opposition to the perspective of socialist revolution.

Lenin’s analysis in *Imperialism* had three core components:

1. It showed how the war had arisen out of an objective stage of capitalist development, the growth of monopoly out of competition and the rise of predatory finance capital to a dominant position, not from a “preferred” policy.

2. The domination of finance capital, the transition to monopoly capital with giant enterprises, banks and financial institutions operating on a world scale had not only led to war. These same processes had resulted in a vast change in the social relations of production, a tremendous socialisation of production and labour.

Therefore imperialism, based on the domination of parasitic finance capital, was not only moribund capitalism. The changes it had brought about, socialisation of production, signified, within the capitalist economy itself, the beginning of the transition to socialism. That transition, however, could only be realised, actualised, through the defeat of opportunism and its domination over the workers’ movement.

3. Opportunism was not simply the product of the betrayal of individual leaders. It was bound up with objective processes arising from imperialism and was organically tied to the interests of the capitalist ruling classes. Imperialism had led to the acquisition of super-profits from the colonies by the capitalist great powers. This enabled the bourgeoisie of these countries to create a privileged layer of sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, of journalists, the trade union bureaucracies, better off and better placed employees and a privileged section of the working class which received material benefits—crumbs from the table of the imperialist banquet.

From this analysis Lenin drew far-reaching political conclusions.

Imperialism had led to the transformation of the official leaderships of the working class into open agencies of the bourgeoisie. This was the material necessity for the formation of a Third International.

How that struggle was conducted was the key question of the hour.

The struggle against opportunism

The privileged layers, which formed the social constituency for “defence of the fatherland,” formed only a minority. It was necessary to go lower and deeper, to the “lowest mass” and explain to them the necessity of breaking with opportunism and thereby educate them for revolution.

Here the main fire had to be directed against those who played an even more dangerous role by providing the opportunists and social chauvinists with a political cover by using Marxist sounding phrases. The leader of this trend was Kautsky.

From the beginning of the war, having refused to oppose the support for war credits, Kautsky sought to provide social chauvinism with an internationalist hue.

In October 1914, he wrote: “It is the right and duty of everyone to defend his fatherland; true internationalism consists in this right being recognised for socialists of all nations, including those who are at war with my nation.”[13]

In other words, true internationalism consisted in justifying German workers firing at French workers and vice versa in the name of “defence of the fatherland.”

Another attempt to provide an “internationalist” cover for opportunism was advanced by those who invoked the attitude of Marx to the wars of the 19th century, which had led to the formation of the nation states of Europe.

In all those wars, Marx had taken an internationalist standpoint, seeking to assess the victory of which side would be the most advantageous for the cause of democracy and thereby benefit the working class. The same method, it was argued, had to be adopted in the present war. It was necessary, on the basis of an “internationalist” assessment, to determine the victory of which side would be the most advantageous from the standpoint of the working class and socialism.

It is not hard to discern how such a position provided grist to the mill of the social chauvinists. The German opportunists would advance the claim that a defeat of Russian despotism was the most advantageous from an internationalist standpoint, while their French counterparts would likewise argue that the defeat of Prussian autocracy was the most advantageous, again from an internationalist standpoint.

This attempt to provide an internationalist cover for social chauvinism completely ignored the vast changes that had taken place since Marx had written on the question of war.

In the first seven decades of the 19th century, national wars were bound up with the overthrow of absolutism and took place where the objective conditions for socialism had not matured. But in the period since then, for almost half a century, the ruling classes of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Austria and Russia had pursued a policy of plundering colonies and oppressing other nations. It was this policy that was being continued in the present war, Lenin wrote, following the dictum of Clausewitz.

To decide in the present situation the victory of which side would be the most beneficial would be to determine whether it was better that India was plundered by Germany or Britain, whether it was better that China be partitioned by Japan or America, or whether Africa should be pillaged by France or Germany.[14]

Against the defencists

In advancing the perspective of “turn the imperialist war into a civil war,” Lenin countered two other significant arguments.

The slogan of an end to the war with “neither victory nor defeat” raised two decisive questions.

First, it provided a political cover for the defencists. After all, the

supporters of the war efforts of their “own” governments claimed to be fighting against defeat. As the leading right-wing German Social Democrat Eduard David explained: “The significance of our August 4 vote was that we are not for war but against defeat.”[15]

If one is not for victory, but against defeat, this implies opposition to a revolutionary struggle as this could lead to a military defeat for one’s “own” government. Therefore all such action had to be opposed.

Second, the slogan “neither victory nor defeat” raised another, even more important, question. It was based on the conception that there could be a return to the status quo ante, refusing to recognise that the war marked a qualitative historical turn.

A whole era of relatively peaceful organic development had been blasted to smithereens by the guns of August. There could be no going back to it.

The eruption of the war was result of the economic development in the period 1871–1914. A new epoch had dawned, such that if peace did come, but the foundations of the existing socio-economic order remained, then such a “peace” would only be the breeding ground for new wars. The whole system had to be overturned through international socialist revolution.

The same issues arose, in a slightly different form, with regard to the slogan of “peace” now coming into greater prominence as the deprivation of the masses deepened and the real nature of the war became apparent. By the end of 1914 a series of trenches extended across Western Europe that were to remain in place for the next four years. Offensives and counter-offensives brought no change, only mass slaughter, as the prospect of a quick end evaporated.

As Rosa Luxemburg, the German-Polish revolutionist, wrote in April 1915 from her jail in Berlin where she was held because of her opposition to the war:

“The scene has thoroughly changed. The six weeks’ march to Paris has become a world drama. Mass murder has become a monotonous task, and yet the final solution is not one step nearer. Capitalist rule is caught in its own trap. Gone is the first mad delirium... The show is over. The curtain has fallen on trains filled with reservists, as they pull out amid the joyous cries of enthusiastic maidens ... Into the disillusioned atmosphere of pale daylight there rings a different chorus; the hoarse croak of the hawks and hyenas of the battlefield... And the cannon fodder that was loaded upon the trains in August and September is rotting on the battlefields of Belgium and the Vosges, while profits are springing like weeds, from the fields of the dead.” [16]

As the horrors of the war piled up, one upon another, Lenin pointed to the importance of the desire for peace among ever broader masses of the populations of the belligerent countries. It was, he insisted, the duty of socialists to “take a most ardent part in any demonstration motivated by that sentiment.”

But above all they had to make clear that any peace without oppression, annexation and plunder and without the creation of the embryo of new wars could not happen without a revolutionary movement.

“Whoever wants a lasting and democratic peace must stand for civil war against the governments and the bourgeoisie,” he wrote. That is, they must fight for socialist revolution.[17]

The leading role in attacking this perspective was played by Kautsky.

The justification offered by Kautsky and others for their repudiation of the commitments contained in the Basle resolution of 1912 was that it had envisaged the development of a revolutionary situation.

That did not take place with the outbreak of the war—the masses were caught up in the imperialist war drive—and so the conditions supposedly envisaged by the resolution did not apply. The prospect of socialist revolution was therefore an illusion, a chimera. Marxism, as a scientific perspective, had to base itself not on delusions but on an objective appraisal of the situation.

There is no question that large sections of the population were caught up in the war drive when mobilisation was ordered in the belligerent countries. Trotsky explained the reason for this development in mass psychology and the seeming isolation of the revolutionary vanguard at the outbreak of war.

In the period of peace, the influence of the socialists touches upon and influences only the most advanced sections of the working class. Large sections of the population remain outside immediate political struggles. But with the outbreak of war and the beginning of mobilisation, they are drawn into politics.

They are confronted with immediate questions of life and death, in which the government and the military rise up before them as their protector and defender. These feelings are mixed in with confused sentiments of a change, hopes and aspirations for a better situation.

“The same thing happens,” Trotsky wrote, “at the beginning of a revolution, but with one all-important difference. A revolution links these newly aroused elements with the revolutionary class, but war links them—with the government and the army!”

In one case, the confused hopes and sufferings find expression in revolutionary enthusiasm, in the other these same social emotions “temporarily take the form of patriotic intoxication”—a mood that infects wide sections of the working class, including even those who have been influenced by socialism.[18]

In such conditions, Trotsky continued, the party could not launch an immediate revolutionary struggle. It could, however, voice its opposition to the war, declare no confidence in the government, refuse to vote for war credits and, in that way, prepare for changes in mass consciousness that the course of the war would inevitably bring.

The fact that this did not happen, that the signal for war mobilisation was also the signal for the fall of the International, that all the social democratic and labour parties “fell in line with their governments without a single protest” meant there had to be deep causes.

Lenin, above all others, probed those causes to their full and in so doing developed the political strategy and tactics which led to the successful conquest of political power by the working class.

Those who sought to defend the opportunists began by presenting a false picture of the situation with the outbreak of the war.

According to Kautsky, writing in October 1914, “never is government so strong, never are parties so weak, as at the outbreak of war.”

In fact, Lenin responded, “never do governments stand in such need of agreement with all the parties of the ruling class, or the ‘peaceful’ submission of the oppressed classes to that rule in time of war.”[19]

Moreover, he continued, governments may appear to be all powerful, but “seeming” does not coincide with the actual, and no one linked revolutionary expectations simply with the outbreak of war. That was only the beginning of a process and already, Lenin was writing in 1915, symptoms of a revolutionary situation were developing in all countries as the discontent of the masses grew and governments demanded ever greater sacrifices.

“Will this situation last long, how much more acute will it become? Will it lead to revolution? That is something we do not know. And nobody can know. The answer can only be provided by experience gained during the development of revolutionary sentiment and the transition to a revolutionary situation by the advanced class, the proletariat.”[20]

Furthermore, the reference to the lack of revolutionary struggles on the immediate outbreak of war was a product of the situation confronting the working class. In every country, it faced censorship and martial law, compounded by the unity of its leadership with the imperialist governments prosecuting those measures.

Materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice

Going beyond the immediate situation, the issues raised by Lenin are of immense methodological importance, taking us back to point 7 in the

opening lecture by David North in which he pointed to the “essential relationship between scientific materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice.”

The point emphasised by Lenin was the following: the situation was objectively revolutionary in that the ruling classes could not rule in the old way and increasingly neither could the masses live in the old way. But whether this objectively revolutionary situation would lead to an actual revolution could not be assessed by contemplation but only through the development of a revolutionary practice.

What the situation actually contained, whether its potential could be realised, could only be discovered through the intervention of the conscious, subjective factor, the revolutionary party, seeking to develop the movement of the working class, revealing to it the objective situation it confronted and arming its developing struggles with a clear program, worked out to the end, aimed at the conquest of political power.

Lenin’s insistence on how the actual situation had to be grasped, rather than its mere “seeming,” underscored the vital point made by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach* in which he outlined his decisive development of materialist philosophy.

Kautsky and others claimed to be standing on the ground of materialism against the illusion-mongering of Lenin and his perspective of civil war and revolution to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

However, it was not the materialism of Marx on which they sought to base themselves but rather the materialist outlook he had superseded through the incorporation of the gains of German idealist philosophy, above all Hegel, which had laid stress upon the active side, that is, human activity, in the historical process.

In the first of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote:

“The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuousness, activity, practice, not subjectively.” Hence the previous materialist philosophy had not grasped “the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of practical-critical activity.”[21]

In opposition to Kautsky, Lenin explained that no socialist had ever guaranteed that the present war, rather than the next one, would produce a revolution. The issue was that it was the duty of socialists to arouse the revolutionary consciousness of the working class by revealing the actual existence of a revolutionary situation.

Marxism versus social chauvinism

The decisive question was: how was it possible that the most prominent representatives of international socialism had betrayed. The answer lay in a materialist analysis of the origins of the social chauvinist trend.

In the period leading up to the war, stretching back more than a decade and a half, the socialist movement had been rent by a fundamental division over its perspective.

Would socialism come about through a peaceful, gradual development, the accumulation of reforms through parliamentary and trade union activity, or would it come through a breakdown of the capitalist system and the eruption of revolutionary struggles?

In 1898, the leading German social democrat Eduard Bernstein had proposed a fundamental revision of the party’s basic perspective. Summing up the outlook of the gradualist tendency, he said the movement was everything and the final goal nothing. The revisionist tendency was pushed back so far as the formal position of the SPD was concerned. But the practices on which it was based—class collaboration and integration into the very structure of bourgeois rule—continued to gather strength.

The issue flared again in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution in Russia. Was the revolution, with its mass general strikes and the formation of soviets or workers’ councils, which Fred Williams so vividly outlined in his lecture two weeks ago, the harbinger of the European revolution, anticipating the forms it would take, as Rosa Luxemburg insisted? Or was

it, as her opponents, above all in the trade unions, maintained, an expression of Russian backwardness, in no way related to advanced Western Europe?

The betrayal of the Second International brought the issue into clear focus. Its source was the growth and development of the opportunist trend which had come to full flowering and maturity, passing over into direct support for its own bourgeoisie in the war.

Lenin’s analysis of the material roots of this tendency had profound political implications. It meant that the new International, the Third International, could neither be reconstituted out of the remnants of the Second, nor could it be established on the basis of its theory and practices.

The Second International, Lenin explained, had carried out important preparatory work in the period of “gradual” development. But the Third International faced new tasks: the direct revolutionary struggle against capitalist governments, a civil war against the bourgeoisie, the capture of political power and the triumph of socialism.

That necessitated a complete political, ideological and organisational separation from opportunism, which, in period of the Second International, had been regarded as a “legitimate” trend within socialism.

In Russia that political and organisational separation had been carried through in the split with the Mensheviks. For Lenin, its international significance was now coming into clearer focus.

The division between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had begun at the 1903 congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. It was somewhat unclear in that it developed over a phrase on what constituted party membership.

With the eruption of the 1905 revolution, the class basis of the divergence began to emerge. The policy of the Bolsheviks was based on hostility and opposition to the liberal bourgeoisie. That of the Mensheviks was an accommodation to the liberal bourgeoisie, most graphically expressed by Plekhanov’s declaration that the Moscow workers should not have taken up arms in the December uprising.

The task in Russia was a bourgeois-democratic revolution, they maintained, the ending of feudal absolutist rule, and the coming to power of a bourgeois regime. The actions in Moscow would only push the liberal bourgeoisie away from fulfilling its assigned historical role. It was necessary, therefore, to proceed with “tact” in relation to the bourgeois party, the Cadets, according to Plekhanov.

The disputes continued after 1905 and within the International they were regarded as something of a Russian peculiarity. They are “at it again” was a common reaction.

The betrayal of the Second International posed the necessity for a complete organisational separation from opportunism and its defenders. To Lenin it made clear the international significance of the split with the Mensheviks.

The complete severance of the proletarian movement in Russia from petty-bourgeois opportunist elements had been prepared by the whole history of the movement, Lenin wrote.

“Those who disregard that history, and, by declaiming against ‘factionalism,’ make themselves incapable of understanding the real process of the formation of a proletarian party in Russia ...”

The struggle in Russia had international significance because it was rooted, in the final analysis, in the same processes that had resulted in the growth and victory of opportunism in the Second International, leading to its betrayal in 1914. The same type of “European” development, in which privileged strata of the petty bourgeoisie acquired certain “great power” privileges of their “own” nation, had its Russian counterpart in the form of Menshevism, Lenin wrote.

But in Russia, a split, both political and organisational, had been carried out with these forces. These were the “internationalist” tactics, consistently revolutionary, that now had to be extended.[22]

The Zimmerwald conference

The arena on which this struggle began was the socialist anti-war conference held in the small Swiss village of Zimmerwald from September 5–8, 1915. It was held in secret. The hotel booking was made in the name of an ornithological society. There was no bird watching, though there were some veritable eagles of human thought present, most notably Lenin and Trotsky.

The Zimmerwald conference was organised by the Swiss socialist Robert Grimm. His perspective, and that of his supporters, who comprised the majority of the delegates, numbering 43 in all, was far removed from that of Lenin.

Grimm's aim was not to launch a revolutionary movement against the war but to remove the stain of the August 4 betrayal from the Second International, and restore its pre-war foundations under the general slogan of peace.

There was a broad left faction, which constituted a minority, and within that an even smaller faction, numbering around five, grouped around Lenin.

Lenin did not have any illusions as to what the conference would bring. He saw it as a step forward in rallying the genuine Marxist forces internationally, however small they may be.

The Swiss socialist left-winger Fritz Platten recalled that during the proceedings of the conference Lenin was the most attentive listener, speaking rarely and never for long. But when he did, his words had "the impact of a caustic shower." It was Lenin's perspective—he was the only one to present a draft resolution for the conference—which set the tone for many of the discussions.

According to Platten, "Lenin's strength consisted in the fact that he saw the laws of historical development with phenomenal clarity." [23]

It was his focus on those laws which determined Lenin's attitude to all attempts to revive the Second International by trying to wipe away the stain of August 4.

The collapse of the Second International was not simply the result of the betrayal of its leadership. It signified the end of a whole historical epoch of relatively peaceful development. A new era of wars and revolutions had dawned. A new International had to be built, on new foundations, to meet new tasks.

The slogan proposed was for peace. Yet this contained all the issues: how could there be peace without the overthrow of the capitalist system, whose historical development into imperialism had led to the war? And that task could not be carried out without a complete separation from, and intransigent struggle against, all those who had come to represent the interests of imperialism inside the workers' movement.

During the evening session of September 7, the French delegate, Alphonse Merrheim, summed up the issues. The majority wanted peace action by the proletariat, not narrow formulas, he said. Merrheim was not against revolution but insisted: "A revolutionary movement can only grow from a striving for peace. You, comrade Lenin, are not motivated from a striving for peace, but by the desire to set up a new International. This is what divides us." [24]

The outcome of the Zimmerwald conference was the issuing of a manifesto, drafted by Trotsky, and signed by all, against the imperialist war. It did not represent by any means all that Lenin, or even Trotsky, had wanted. But it was an advance, a step, as Lenin put it, "towards an ideological and practical break with opportunism and social chauvinism." [25]

In the coming months, Zimmerwald was to be associated with widening opposition to the war as the contents of the manifesto, denouncing imperialism, made their way into the consciousness of broader sections of the international working class amid ongoing mass slaughter and deepening privations.

The foundations for a new International

But the underlying issues on which the conference had turned remained.

They were articulated in a resolution issued by Rosa Luxemburg in March 1916 on the foundations for a new International. It could only be born, she wrote, as a result of revolutionary struggles of the masses, the first word of which was mass action to force the achievement of peace.

"The existence and viability of the International is not an organisational issue, not a question of understandings within a small circle of individuals who come forward as representatives of the oppositionally-inclined strata of the working population, but rather a question of the mass movement of the proletariat of all lands." [26]

Herein lay a fundamental difference with Lenin's conception.

He had no doubt the war would provoke mass revolutionary struggles. But the crucial question was whether, in advance of those struggles, there existed a revolutionary leadership, which had worked out the main elements of the necessary program, and which, most importantly, had made clear its hostility to all those political tendencies, above all those emerging from the workers' movement itself, which, having supported the war, would come forward to try and derail the revolution.

Only on the basis of such preparation could the outbreak of revolution—a product of the same conditions that had led to the war—lead to the successful conquest of political power by the working class.

The correctness of this perspective was to be verified in the course of 1917. Just a year and a half after the Zimmerwald conference, the February revolution erupted, followed eight months later by the October revolution.

In his *Farewell Letter to Swiss Workers* as he began the journey back to Russia, Lenin wrote:

"When in November 1914 our party put forward the slogan 'Turn the imperialist war into a civil war of the oppressed against the oppressors for the attainment of socialism,' the social patriots met this slogan with hatred and malicious ridicule, and the social democratic 'centre' with incredulous, sceptical, meek, and exceptional silence. Now, after March 1917, only the blind can fail to see that it is a correct slogan. Transformation of the imperialist war is becoming a fact. Long live the proletarian revolution that is beginning in Europe." [27]

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