

The Left Has a Long, Proud Tradition of Opposing War

BY

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There's a long and rich tradition of the Left's opposition to militarism that dates back to the First International. It's an excellent resource for understanding the origins of war under capitalism and helping leftists maintain our clear opposition to it.

While political science has probed the ideological, political, economic, and even psychological motivations behind the drive to war, socialist theory has made a unique contribution by highlighting the relationship between the development of capitalism and war. The Left has long theorized its opposition to war, and the main positions of socialist theorists and organizations over the past 150 years offer useful resources for opposing Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as for continuing to oppose NATO.

Rarely have wars — not to be confused with revolutions — had the democratizing effect that the theorists of socialism hoped for. Indeed, they have often proved themselves to be the worst way of carrying out a revolution, both because of the human cost and because of the destruction of the productive forces that they entail. If this was true in the past, it is even more evident in contemporary societies where weapons of mass destruction are continually proliferating.

The Economic Causes of War

In the debates of the First International, César de Paepe, one of its principal leaders, formulated what would become the classical position of the workers' movement on the question of war: namely, that wars are inevitable under the regime of capitalist production. In contemporary society, they are brought about not by the ambitions of monarchs or other individuals but by the dominant social-economic model. The lesson for the workers' movement came from the belief

that any war should be considered “a civil war,” a ferocious clash between workers that deprived them of the means necessary for their survival.

Karl Marx never developed any consistent or systematic position on war in his writings. In *Capital*, volume 1, he argued that violence was an economic force, “the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one.” But he did not think of war as a crucial shortcut for the revolutionary transformation of society, and a major aim of his political activity was to commit workers to the principle of international solidarity.

War was such an important question for Friedrich Engels that he devoted one of his last pieces of writing to it. In his pamphlet “Can Europe Disarm?”, he noted that in the previous twenty-five years, every major power had tried to outdo its rivals militarily and in terms of war preparations. This had involved unprecedented levels of arms production and brought the old continent closer to “a war of destruction such as the world has never seen.”

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According to Engels, “The system of standing armies has been carried to such extremes throughout Europe that it must either bring economic ruin to the peoples on account of the military burden, or else degenerate into a general war of extermination.” He emphasized that standing armies were maintained just as much for reasons of domestic politics as they were for external military purposes. They were intended “to provide protection not so much against the external enemy as the internal one,” Engels wrote, by strengthening the forces to repress the proletariat and workers’ struggles. As popular layers paid more than anyone else the costs of war, through taxes and the provision of troops to the state, the workers’ movement should fight for “the gradual reduction of the term of [military] service by international treaty” and for disarmament as the only effective “guarantee of peace.”

Tests and Collapse

It was not long before a peacetime theoretical debate turned into the foremost political issue of the age. Initially, representatives of the workers' movement opposed any support for war when the Franco-Prussian conflict (the one that preceded the Paris Commune) erupted in 1870. The Social Democratic deputies Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel condemned the annexationist objectives of Bismarck's Germany and voted against war credits. Their decision to "reject the bill for additional funding to continue the war" earned them a two-year prison sentence for high treason, but it helped to show the working class an alternative way to build on the crisis.

As the major European powers kept up their imperialist expansion, the controversy on war acquired ever greater weight in the debates of the Second International. A resolution adopted at its founding congress had enshrined peace as "the indispensable precondition of any emancipation of the workers."

As the *Weltpolitik* — the aggressive policy of imperial Germany to extend its power in the international arena — changed the geopolitical setting, anti-militarist principles sank deeper roots in the workers' movement and influenced the discussions on armed conflicts. War was no longer seen only as hastening the breakdown of the system (an idea on the Left going back to Maximilien Robespierre's slogan, "no revolution without revolution.") It was now viewed as a danger because of its grievous consequences for the proletariat in the shape of hunger, destitution, and unemployment.

The resolution "On Militarism and International Conflicts," adopted by the Second International at its Stuttgart congress in 1907, recapitulated all the key points that had become the common heritage of the workers' movement. Among these were a vote against budgets that increased military spending, antipathy to standing armies, and a preference for a system of people's militias.

As the years passed, the Second International commitment to peace lessened, and by the time of World War I, the majority of European socialist parties voted to support it — a course of action that had disastrous consequences. Arguing that the "benefits of progress" should not be monopolized by the capitalists, the workers' movement came to share the expansionist aims of the ruling classes and was swamped by nationalist ideology. In this sense, the Second International proved completely impotent in the face of the war, ceding its own aim to preserve peace.

Against this backdrop, it was Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin who were two of the most vigorous opponents of the war. Articulate and principled, Luxemburg demonstrated how militarism was a key vertebra of the state and worked to make the “War on war!” slogan “the cornerstone of working-class politics.” As she wrote in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, the Second International had imploded because it failed “to achieve a common tactic and action by the proletariat in all countries.” From then on, the “main goal” of the proletariat should therefore be “fighting imperialism and preventing wars, in peace as in war.”

In *Socialism and the War* — among other writings penned during World War I — Lenin’s great merit was to identify two fundamental questions. The first concerned the “historical falsification” at work whenever the bourgeoisie tried to attribute a “progressive sense of national liberation” to what were in reality wars of “plunder.”

The second was the masking of contradictions by the social reformists who had replaced the class struggle with a claim on “morsels of the profits obtained by their national bourgeoisie through the looting of other countries.” The most celebrated thesis of this pamphlet — that revolutionaries should seek to “turn imperialist war into civil war” — implied that those who really wanted a “lasting democratic peace” had to wage “civil war against their governments and the bourgeoisie.” Lenin was convinced of what history would later show to be inaccurate: that any class struggle consistently waged in time of war would “inevitably” create a revolutionary spirit among the masses.

Lines of Demarcation

World War I produced divisions not only in the Second International but also in the anarchist movement. In an article published shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, Peter Kropotkin wrote that “the task of any person holding dear the idea of human progress is to squash the German invasion in Western Europe.”

In a reply to Kropotkin, the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta argued that, although he was not a pacifist and thought it legitimate to take up arms in a war of liberation, the world war was not — as bourgeois propaganda asserted — a struggle “for the general good against the common enemy” of democracy but yet another example of the ruling-class subjugation of the working masses. He was aware that “a German victory would certainly spell the triumph of militarism, but also that a triumph for the Allies would mean Russian-British domination in Europe and Asia.”

In the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, Kropotkin upheld the need “to resist an aggressor who represents the destruction of all our hopes of liberation.” Victory for the Triple Entente against Germany would be the lesser evil and do less to undermine the existing liberties. On the other side, Malatesta and his fellow-signatories of *The Anarchist International Antiwar Manifesto* declared, “No distinction is possible between offensive and defensive wars.” Moreover, they added that “none of the belligerents has any right to lay claim to civilization, just as none of them is entitled to claim legitimate self-defense.” For Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Ferdinand Nieuwenhuis, and the great majority of the anarchist movement, World War I was a further episode in the conflict among capitalists of various imperialist powers, which was being waged at the expense of the working class. With no “ifs” or “buts,” they stuck with the slogan “no man and no penny for the army,” firmly rejecting even indirect support for the pursuit of war.

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Attitudes to the war also aroused debate in the feminist movement. The need for women to replace conscripted men in jobs — for much lower wages, in conditions of overexploitation — encouraged support for war in a sizable part of the newborn suffragette movement. Some of its leaders went so far as to petition for laws allowing the enlistment of women in the armed forces. Yet more radical, antiwar elements persisted. Communist feminists worked to expose duplicitous governments, which were using the war to roll back fundamental social reforms

Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, Sylvia Pankhurst, and of course Rosa Luxemburg were among the first to embark lucidly and courageously on the path that would show successive generations how the struggle against militarism was essential to the struggle against patriarchy. Later, the rejection of war became a distinctive part of International Women’s Day, and opposition to war budgets at the outbreak of any new conflict featured prominently in many platforms of the international feminist movement.

With the rise of fascism and the outbreak of World War II, violence escalated still further. After Adolph Hitler’s troops attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the Great Patriotic War that ended

with the defeat of Nazism became such a central element in Russian national unity that it survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and has lasted until our own days.

With the postwar division of the world into two blocs, Joseph Stalin taught that the main task of the international communist movement was to safeguard the Soviet Union. The creation of a buffer zone of eight countries in Eastern Europe was a central pillar of this policy. From 1961, under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union began a new political course that came to be known as “peaceful coexistence.” However, this attempt at constructive cooperation was geared only to the United States, not to the other countries of “actually existing socialism.”

The Soviet Union had already brutally crushed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Similar events took place in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Faced with demands for democratization during the “Prague Spring,” the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided unanimously to send in half a million soldiers and thousands of tanks. Leonid Brezhnev explained the action by referring to what he called the “limited sovereignty” of Warsaw Pact countries: “When forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country toward capitalism, it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries.” According to this antidemocratic logic, the definition of what was and was not “socialism” naturally fell to the arbitrary decision of the Soviet leaders.

With the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Red Army again became a major instrument of Moscow’s foreign policy, which continued to claim the right to intervene in what it described as its own “security zone.” These military interventions not only worked against a general arms reduction but served to discredit and globally weaken socialism. The Soviet Union was increasingly seen as an imperial power acting in ways not unlike those of the United States, which, since the onset of the Cold War, had more or less secretly backed coups d’état and helped to overthrow democratically elected governments in more than twenty countries around the world.

To Be on the Left Is to Be Against War

With the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Left is once again confronted with the question of how to position itself when a country’s sovereignty is under attack. It is a mistake for governments like Venezuela’s to refuse condemnation of the invasion. This will make denunciations of possible future acts of aggression by the United States appear less credible. We

might recall Lenin's words in *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*:

The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another "Great" Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination.

The Left has historically supported the principle of national self-determination and defended the right of individual states to establish their frontiers on the basis of the express will of the population. Making direct reference to Ukraine, in *Results of the Discussion on Self-Determination*, Lenin argued:

If the socialist revolution were to be victorious in Petrograd, Berlin, and Warsaw, the Polish socialist government, like the Russian and German socialist governments, would renounce the "forcible retention" of, say, the Ukrainians within the frontiers of the Polish state.

Why suggest, then, that anything different should be conceded to the nationalist government led by Vladimir Putin?

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On the other hand, all too many on the Left have yielded to the temptation to become — directly or indirectly — cobelligerents, fueling a new *union sacrée*. Such a position today serves increasingly to blur the distinction between Atlanticism and pacifism. History shows that, when they do not oppose war, progressive forces lose an essential part of their reason for existence and end up swallowing the ideology of the opposite camp. This happens whenever left parties

make their presence in government the essential element of their political action — as the Italian Communists did in supporting the NATO interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan, or as does much of today's Unidas Podemos, which joins the chorus of the Spanish parliament in favor of sending weapons to the Ukrainian army.

Bonaparte Is Not Democracy

Reflecting on the Crimean War, in 1854 Marx opposed liberal democrats who exalted the anti-Russian coalition:

It is a mistake to describe the war against Russia as a war between liberty and despotism. Apart from the fact that if such be the case, liberty would be for the nonce represented by a Bonaparte, the whole avowed object of the war is the maintenance . . . of the Vienna treaties — those very treaties which annul the liberty and independence of nations.

If we replace Bonaparte with the United States and the Vienna treaties with NATO, these observations seem as if written for today.

In today's discourse, those who oppose both Russian and Ukrainian nationalism, as well as the expansion of NATO, are often accused of political indecision or simple naivete. But this is not the case. The position of those who propose a policy of nonalignment is the most effective way of ending the war as soon as possible and ensuring the smallest number of victims. It is necessary to pursue ceaseless diplomatic activity based on two firm points: de-escalation and the neutrality of independent Ukraine.

Furthermore, although support for NATO across Europe appears strengthened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is necessary to work harder to ensure that public opinion does not see the largest and most aggressive war machine in the world — NATO — as the solution to the problems of global security. It must be shown that it is a dangerous and ineffectual organization, which, in its drive for expansion and unipolar domination, serves to fuel tensions leading to war in the world.

For the Left, war cannot be “the continuation of politics by other means,” to quote Carl von Clausewitz's famous dictum. In reality, it merely certifies the failure of politics. If the Left wishes to become hegemonic and to show itself capable of using its history for the tasks of today, it needs to write indelibly on its banners the words “anti-militarism” and “No to war!”

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