

# War and the Left: Considerations on a Chequered History

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crs)**Marcello Musto** 

York University, Canada

## Abstract

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. There's a long and rich tradition of the Left's opposition to militarism that dates back to the International Working Men's Association. It is an excellent resource for understanding the origins of war under capitalism and helping leftists maintain our clear opposition to it. In this article, the author examines the position of all the main currents (socialist, socialdemocratic, communist, anarchist and feminist) intellectuals (Engels, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Jaurès, Luxemburg, Lenin, Mao and Khrushchev) of the Left on the war and its different declinations ('war of defence', 'just war', 'revolutionary war').

## Keywords

capitalism, imperialism, war and peace, internationalism, Marxism

## The economic causes of war

While the science of politics has probed the ideological, political, economic and even psychological motivations behind the drive to war, socialist theory has made one of its most compelling contributions by highlighting the nexus between the development of capitalism and the spread of wars.

In the debates of the International Working Men's Association (1864–1872), César de Paepe, one of its principal leaders, formulated what would become the classical position of the workers' movement on the question: 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 (De Paepe, 2014a, 2014b; Musto, 2014). The socialist movement also showed which sections of the population were struck hardest by the dire consequences of war. At the congress of the International held in 1868, the delegates adopted a motion that called upon workers to pursue 'the final abolition of all war',<sup>1</sup> since they were the ones who would pay – economically or with their own blood, whether they were among the victors or the defeated – for the decisions of their ruling classes and the governments representing them.

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### Corresponding author:

Marcello Musto, Department of Sociology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, 2060 Vari Hall, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada.

Email: [marcello.musto@gmail.com](mailto:marcello.musto@gmail.com)

The lesson for the workers' movement came from the belief that any war should be considered 'a civil war' (Freymond, 1962: 403; Musto, 2014: 49), a ferocious clash between workers that deprived them of the means necessary for their survival. They needed to act resolutely against any war, by resisting conscription and taking strike action. Internationalism thus became a cardinal point of the future society, which, with the end of capitalism and the rivalry among bourgeois states on the world market, would have eliminated the main underlying causes of war.

Among the precursors of socialism, Claude Henri de Saint-Simon had taken a decisive stand against both war and social conflict, regarding both as obstacles to the fundamental progress of industrial production. Karl Marx did not develop in any of his writings his views – fragmentary and sometimes contradictory – on war, nor did he put forward guidelines for the correct attitude to be taken towards it. When he chose between opposing camps, his only constant was his opposition to Tsarist Russia, which he saw as the outpost of counter-revolution and one of the main barriers to working-class emancipation. In *Capital* (1867), he argued that violence was an economic force, 'the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one' (Marx, 1996: 739). 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. As Friedrich Engels also argued, they should act resolutely in individual countries against the dampening of class struggle that the propagandistic invention of an external enemy threatened to bring about at any outbreak of war. In various letters to leaders of the workers' movement, Engels stressed the ideological power of the snare of patriotism and the delay to the proletarian revolution resulting from waves of chauvinism. Moreover, in *Anti-Dühring* (1878), following an analysis of the effects of ever more deadly weaponry, he declared that the task of socialism was 'to blow up militarism and all standing armies' (Engels, 1987: 158).

War was such an important question for Engels that he devoted one of his last writings to it. In 'Can Europe Disarm?' (1893), he noted that in the previous 25 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' (Engels, 1990: 372). According to the co-author of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), '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'. In his analysis, Engels did not forget to highlight that standing armies were maintained chiefly for internal political as much as external military purposes. They were intended 'to provide protection not so much against the external enemy as the internal one', by strengthening the forces to repress the proletariat and workers' struggles. As popular layers paid more than anyone else the costs of war, through the provision of troops to the state and taxes, 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' (Engels, 1990: 371).

## Tests and collapse

It was not long before a peacetime theoretical debate turned into the foremost political issue of the age, when the workers' movement had to face real situations in which their representatives initially opposed any support for war. In the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 (which preceded the Paris Commune), the Social Democrat 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' (Pelz, 2016: 50) earned them a 2-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 (1889–1916). A resolution adopted at its founding congress had enshrined peace as ‘the indispensable precondition of any emancipation of the workers’ (Dominick, 1982: 343). The supposed peace policy of the bourgeoisie was mocked and characterized as one of ‘armed peace’ and, in 1895, Jean Jaurès, the leader of the French Socialist Party (SFIO), gave a speech in parliament in which he famously summed up the apprehensions of the Left: ‘Your violent and chaotic society still, even when it wants peace, even when it is in a state of apparent repose, bears war within itself, just as a sleeping cloud bears a storm’ (Jaurès, 1982: 32).

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 opening up revolutionary opportunities and hastening the breakdown of the system (an idea on the Left since the Revolutionary War of 1792).<sup>2</sup> It was now viewed as a danger because of its grievous consequences for the proletariat in the shape of hunger, destitution and unemployment. It thus posed a serious threat for progressive forces, and, as Karl Kautsky (1903) wrote in *The Social Revolution*, they would in case of war be ‘heavily loaded with tasks that are not essential’ (p. 77) to them, and which would make the final victory more distant rather than bring it closer.

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, and support for the plan to create courts of arbitration to settle international conflicts peacefully. This excluded a resort to general strikes against any kind of wars, as proposed by Gustave Hervé, since a majority of those present deemed this too radical and too Manichaean. The resolution ended with an amendment drafted by Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and Yulii Martov, which stated that

in case war should break out [ . . . ], it is the duty [of socialists] to intervene in favour of its speedy termination, and with all their powers to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war, to rouse the masses and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule. (Vv. Aa., 1972: 80)

Since this did not, however, compel the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to make any change of political line, its representatives also voted in favour of it. The text, as amended, was the last document on war that secured unanimous support from the Second International.

More intense competition among capitalist states on the world market, together with the outbreak of a number of international conflicts, made the general picture even more alarming. The publication of Jaurès’s *The New Army* encouraged discussion of another central theme of the period: the distinction between offensive and defensive wars and the attitude to be taken to the latter, including in cases where a country’s independence was threatened (see Marcobelli, 2021: 155–227). For Jaurès, the only task of the army should be to defend the nation against any offensive aggression, or any aggressor that did not accept resolution of the dispute through mediation. All military action that came under this category should be considered legitimate. Luxemburg’s clear-sighted critique of this position pointed out that ‘historical phenomena such as modern wars cannot be measured with the yardstick of “justice”, or through a paper schema of defence and aggression’ (Luxemburg, 1911). In her view, it was necessary to bear in mind the difficulty of establishing whether a war was really offensive or defensive, or whether the state that started it had deliberately decided to attack or had been forced to do so because of the stratagems adopted by the country that opposed it. She therefore thought that the distinction should be discarded, and further criticized

Jaurès's idea of the 'armed nation', on the grounds that it ultimately tended to fuel the growing militarization in society.

As the years passed, the Second International committed itself less and less to a policy of action in favour of peace. Its opposition to rearmament and war preparations was very lacklustre, and an increasingly moderate and legalistic wing of the SPD traded its support for military credits – and then even for colonial expansion – in return for the granting of greater political freedoms in Germany. Important leaders and eminent theorists, such as Gustav Noske, Henry Hyndman and Arturo Labriola, were among the first to arrive at these positions. Subsequently, a majority of German Social Democrats, French Socialists, British Labour Party leaders and other European reformists ended up supporting the First World War (1914–1918). This course had disastrous consequences. With the idea 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. The Second International proved completely impotent in the face of the war, failing in one of its main objectives: the preservation of peace.

Lenin and other delegates at the Zimmerwald conference (1915) – including Leon Trotsky, who drafted the final manifesto – foresaw that 'for decades war spending will absorb the best energies of peoples, undermining social improvements and impeding any progress'. In their eyes the war revealed the 'naked form of modern capitalism, which has become irreconcilable, not only with the interests of the working masses [ . . . ] but even with the first conditions of human communal existence' (Vv. Aa., 1915). The warning was heeded by only a minority in the workers' movement, as was the call to all European workers at the Kienthal Conference (1916):

Your governments and their newspapers tell you that the war must be continued to kill militarism. They are deceiving you! War has never killed war. Indeed, it sparks feelings and wishes for revenge. In this way in marking you for sacrifice, they enclose you in an infernal circle.

Finally breaking with the approach of the Stuttgart Congress, which had called for international courts of arbitration, the final document at Kienthal declared that 'the illusions of bourgeois pacifism' (Vv. Aa., 1977: 371) would not interrupt the spiral of war but would help to preserve the existing social-economic system. The only way to prevent future military conflicts was for the popular masses to conquer political power and overthrow capitalist property.

Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin were the two most vigorous opponents of the war. Luxemburg extended the theoretical understanding of the Left and showed how militarism was a key vertebra of the state.<sup>3</sup> Displaying a conviction and effectiveness with few equals among other communist leaders, she argued that the 'War on war!' slogan should become 'the cornerstone of working-class politics'. As she wrote in the *Theses on the Tasks of International 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' (Luxemburg, 1915).

In *Socialism and War* (1915) and many other writings during the First World War, Lenin's great merit was to identify two fundamental questions. The first concerned the 'historical falsification' whenever the bourgeoisie tried to attribute a 'progressive sense of national liberation' to what were in reality wars of 'plunder' (Lenin, 1971: 299–300), waged with the sole aim of deciding which belligerents were this time to oppress the most foreign peoples and to increase the inequalities of capitalism. The second was the masking of contradictions by the social reformists – or 'social-chauvinists', as he (Lenin, 1971: 306) called them – who ultimately endorsed the justifications for war despite their having defined it as a 'criminal' activity in the resolutions adopted by the Second International. Behind their claim to be 'defending the

fatherland' lay the right that certain great powers had given themselves to 'pillage the colonies and to oppress foreign peoples'. Wars were not fought to safeguard 'the existence of nations' but 'to defend the privileges, domination, plunder and violence' of the various 'imperialist bourgeoisies' (Lenin, 1971: 307). The socialists who had capitulated to patriotism had replaced the class struggle with a claim on 'morsels of the profits obtained by their national bourgeoisie through the looting of other countries'. Accordingly, Lenin (1971: 314) was in favour of 'defensive wars' – not, that is, the national defense of European countries à la Jaurès, but the 'just wars' of 'oppressed and subjugated peoples' who had been 'plundered and deprived of their rights' by the 'great slave owning powers'. The most celebrated thesis of this pamphlet – that revolutionaries should seek to 'turn imperialist war into civil war' (Lenin, 1971: 315)<sup>4</sup> – implied that those who really wanted a 'lasting democratic peace' had to wage 'civil war against their governments and the bourgeoisie' (Lenin, 1971: 315). Lenin was convinced of what history would later show to be imprecise: that any class struggle consistently waged in time of war would 'inevitably' create a revolutionary spirit among the masses.

### Lines of demarcation

The First World War 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, Kropotkin (1914: 76–77) wrote that 'the task of any person holding dear the idea of human progress is to squash the German invasion in Western Europe'. This statement, seen by many as ditching the principles for which he had fought all his life, was an attempt to move beyond the slogan of 'a general strike against the war' – which had gone unheeded by the working masses – and to avoid the general regression of European politics that would result from a German victory. In Kropotkin's view, if anti-militarists remained inert, they would indirectly assist the invaders' plans of conquest, and the resulting obstacle would be even more difficult to overcome for those fighting for a social revolution.

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' (Malatesta, 1993: 230).<sup>5</sup>

In the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, Kropotkin et al. (1916) 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 (1998) and his fellow-signatories (p. 388) of the anti-war manifesto of the Anarchist International (1915) 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-defence'. The First World War, they insisted, was a further episode in the conflict among capitalists of various imperialist powers, which was being waged at the expense of the working class. Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Ferdinand Nieuwenhuis and the great majority of the anarchist movement were convinced that it would be an unforgivable error to support the bourgeois governments. Instead, with no ifs or buts, they stuck with the slogan 'no man and no penny for the army', firmly rejecting even any indirect support for the pursuit of war.

Attitudes to the war also aroused debate in the feminist movement. The need for women to replace conscripted men in jobs that had long been a male monopoly – for a much lower wage, in conditions of overexploitation – encouraged the spread of chauvinist ideology in a sizable part of the new-born suffragette movement. Some of its leaders went so far as to petition for laws allowing the enlistment of women in the armed forces. Exposure of duplicitous governments – which, in evoking the enemy at the gates, used the war to roll back fundamental social reforms – was one of the most important achievements of the main women communist leaders of the time. 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 on the outbreak of any new conflict featured prominently in many platforms of the international feminist movement.

### **The end does not justify the means and wrong means damage the end**

The deep split between revolutionaries and reformists, widening into a strategic gulf after the birth of the Soviet Union<sup>6</sup> and the growth of ideological dogmatism in the 1920s and 1930s, ruled out any alliance against militarism between the Communist International (1919–1943) and the European Socialist and Social Democratic parties.<sup>7</sup> Having supported the war, the parties making up the Labour and Socialist International (1923–1940) had lost all credit in the eyes of the communists. The Leninist idea of 'turning imperialist war into civil war' still had currency in Moscow, where leading politicians and theorists thought a 'new 1914' was inevitable. On both sides, then, the talk was more of what to do if a new war broke out than of how to prevent one from beginning. The slogans and declarations of principle differed substantially from what was expected to happen and from what then turned into political action. Among the critical voices in the Communist camp were those of Nikolai Bukharin, a proponent of the slogan 'struggle for peace', and among the Russian leaders more convinced that it was 'one of the key issues of the contemporary world'; and Georgi Dimitrov, who argued that not all the great powers were equally responsible for the threat of war, and who favoured a rapprochement with the reformist parties to build a broad popular front against it. Both these views contrasted with the litany of Soviet orthodoxy, which, far from updating theoretical analysis, repeated that the danger of war was built equally, and without distinction, into all the imperialist powers<sup>8</sup>.

Mao Zedong's (1966: 15) views on the matter were quite different. At the head of the liberation movement against the Japanese invasion, he wrote in *On Protracted War* (1938) that 'just wars' – in which communists should actively participate – are 'endowed with tremendous power, which can transform many things or clear the way for their transformation' (Mao Tse-Tung, 1966: 26–27). Mao Tse-Tung's (1966: 53) proposed strategy, therefore, was 'to oppose unjust war with just war', and furthermore to 'continue the war until its political objective [is] achieved'. Arguments for the 'omnipotence of revolutionary war' recur in *Problems of War and Strategy* (1938), where he argues that 'only with guns can the whole world be transformed' (Mao Tse-Tung, 1965: 219), and that 'the seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution' (Mao Tse-Tung, 1965: 225).

In Europe, the escalating violence of the Nazi-Fascist front, at home as well as abroad, and the outbreak of the Second World War (1939–1945) created an even more nefarious scenario than the 1914–1918 war. After 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 post-war 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 (seven after the exit of Yugoslavia) was a central pillar of this policy. In the same period, the Truman Doctrine marked the advent of a new type of war: the Cold War. In its support of anti-communist forces in Greece, in the Marshall Plan (1948) and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (1949), the United States of America contributed to avoid the advance of progressive forces in Western Europe. The Soviet Union responded with the Warsaw Pact (1955). This configuration led to a huge arms race, which, despite the fresh memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, also involved a proliferation of nuclear bomb tests.

From 1961, under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union began a new political course that came to be known as 'peaceful coexistence'. This turn, with its emphasis on non-interference and respect for national sovereignty, as well as economic cooperation with capitalist countries, was supposed to avert the danger of a third world war (which the Cuban missiles crisis showed to be a possibility in 1962) and to support the argument that war was not inevitable. However, this attempt at constructive cooperation was geared only to the United States of America, not the countries of 'actually existing socialism'. In 1956, the Soviet Union had already crushed a revolt in Hungary, and the Communist parties of Western Europe had not condemned but justified the military intervention in the name of protecting the socialist bloc. Palmiro Togliatti, for example, the secretary of the Italian Communist Party, declared: 'We stand with our own side even when it makes a mistake' (cit. in Vittoria, 2015: 219). Most of those who shared this position regretted it bitterly in later years, when they understood the devastating effects of the Soviet operation.

Similar events took place at the height of peaceful coexistence, in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Faced with demands for democratization and economic decentralization 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. At the congress of the Polish United Workers' Party in 1968, 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 towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries'. According to this anti-democratic logic, the definition of what was and was not 'socialism' naturally fell to the arbitrary decision of the Soviet leaders. But this time critics on the Left were more forthcoming and even represented the majority. Although disapproval of the Soviet action was expressed not only by New Left movements but by a majority of Communist parties, including the Chinese, the Russians did not pull back but carried through a process that they called 'normalization'. The Soviet Union continued to earmark a sizable part of its economic resources for military spending, and this helped to reinforce an authoritarian culture in society. In this way, it lost forever the goodwill of the peace movement, which had become even larger through the extraordinary mobilizations against the war in Vietnam.

One of the most important wars in the next decade began with the Soviet 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'. The ill-starred decision turned into an exhausting adventure that stretched over more than 10 years, causing a huge number of deaths and creating millions of refugees. On this occasion, the international Communist movement was much less reticent than it had been in relation to the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Yet this new war revealed even more clearly to international public opinion the split between 'actually existing socialism' and a political alternative based on peace and opposition to militarism.

Taken as a whole, 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 20 countries around the world. Finally, the 'socialist wars' in 1977–1979 between Cambodia and Vietnam and China and Vietnam, against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet conflict, dissipated whatever leverage 'Marxist-Leninist' ideology (already remote from the original foundations laid by Marx and Engels) had in attributing war exclusively to the economic imbalances of capitalism.

## To be on the Left is to be against war

The end of the Cold War did not lessen the amount of interference in other countries' affairs, nor did it increase the freedom of every people to choose the political regime under which it lives. The numerous wars – even without a UN mandate and defined, absurdly, as 'humanitarian' – carried out by the United States in the past 25 years, to which should be added new forms of conflict, illegal sanctions, and political, economic and media conditioning, demonstrate that the bipolar division of the world between two superpowers did not give way to the era of liberty and progress promised by the neoliberal mantra of the 'New World Order'. In this context, many political forces that once lay claim to the values of the Left have joined in a number of wars. From Kosovo to Iraq and Afghanistan – to mention only the main wars waged by NATO since the fall of the Berlin Wall – these forces have each time given their support to armed intervention and made themselves less and less distinguishable from the Right.

The Russian–Ukrainian war has again faced the Left with the dilemma of how to react when a country's sovereignty is under attack. The failure to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a political mistake on the part of the government of Venezuela, and it makes denunciations of possible future acts of aggression committed by the United States appear less credible. It is true that, as Marx wrote to Ferdinand Lassalle in 1860 (Marx, 1985: 154; Musto, 2018: 132), 'in foreign policy, there's little to be gained by using such catchwords as "reactionary" and "revolutionary"' – that what is 'subjectively reactionary [may prove to be] objectively revolutionary in foreign policy'. But Left-wing forces should have learned from the 20th century that alliances 'with my enemy's enemy' often lead to counterproductive agreements, especially when, as in our times, the progressive front is politically weak and theoretically confused and lacks the support of mass mobilizations.

Recalling Lenin's (1964b: 148) 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. (Lenin, 1964b: 148)

Beyond the geopolitical interests and intrigues that are usually also in play, the forces of the Left have 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. The Left has fought against wars and 'annexations' because it is aware that these lead to dramatic conflicts between the workers of the dominant nation and the oppressed nation, creating the conditions for the latter to unite with their own bourgeoisie in considering the former as their enemy. In

*Results of the Discussion on Self-Determination* (1916), Lenin (1964a: 329–330) wrote, ‘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?

On the contrary, all too many on the Left have yielded to the temptation to become – directly or indirectly – co-belligerents, fuelling a new *union sacrée* (expression coined in 1914, just to greet the abjuration of the forces of the French Left that, at the outbreak of World War I, decided to endorse the war choices of the government). 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 parties of the Left make their presence in government the fundamental way of measuring 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 its voice to the unanimous chorus of the entire Spanish parliamentary spectrum, in favour of sending weapons to the Ukrainian army. Such subaltern conduct has been punished many times in the past, including at the polls as soon as the occasion has arisen.

## **Bonaparte is not democracy**

In the 1850s, Marx composed a brilliant series of articles on the Crimean War that contain many interesting and useful parallels with the present day. In *Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century* (1857), speaking of the great Muscovite monarch of the 15th century – the one considered to have unified Russia and laid the ground for its autocracy – Marx (1986: 86) stated, ‘One merely needs to replace one series of names and dates with others and it becomes clear that the policies of Ivan III [ . . . ], and those of Russia today, are not merely similar but identical’. In a piece for the *New-York Daily Tribune*, however, in opposition to liberal democrats who exalted the anti-Russian coalition, he wrote,

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. (Marx, 1980: 228)

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

The thinking of those who oppose both Russian and Ukrainian nationalism, as well as the expansion of NATO, does not show proof of political indecision or theoretical ambiguity. In recent weeks, a number of experts have provided explanations of the roots of the conflict (which in no way reduce the barbarity of the Russian invasion), and the position of those who propose a policy of non-alignment is the most effective way of ending the war as soon as possible and ensuring the smallest number of victims. It is not a question of behaving like the ‘beautiful souls’ drenched in abstract idealism, whom Hegel thought incapable of addressing the actual reality of earthly contradictions. On the contrary, the point is to give reality to the only true antidote to an unlimited expansion of the war. There is no end to the voices calling for higher military spending and further conscription, or to those who, like the *European Union* High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, think it is Europe’s task to supply the Ukrainians with ‘the necessary weapons for war’ (Borrell, 2022). But in contrast to these positions, it is necessary to pursue ceaseless

diplomatic activity based on two firm points: de-escalation and the neutrality of independent Ukraine.

Despite the increased support for NATO following the Russian moves, 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.

In *Socialism and War*, Lenin argued that Marxists differ from pacifists and anarchists in that they ‘deem it necessary historically (from the standpoint of Marx’s dialectical materialism [sic!]) to study each war separately’. Continuing, he asserted that ‘In history there have been numerous wars which, in spite of all the horrors, atrocities, distress and suffering that inevitably accompany all wars, were progressive, i.e. benefited the development of mankind’ (Lenin, 1971: 299). If that was true in the past, it would be short-sighted to simply repeat it in contemporary societies where weapons of mass destruction are continually spreading. 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 to be the worst way of carrying out a revolution, both because of the cost in human lives and because of the destruction of the productive forces that they entail. Indeed, wars disseminate an ideology of violence, often combined with the nationalist sentiments that have torn the workers’ movement apart. Rarely favouring practices of self-management and direct democracy, they increase instead the power of authoritarian institutions. This is a lesson that the moderate Left, too, should never forget.

In one of the most fertile passages of *Reflections on War* (1933), Simone Weil (2021) wonders if it is possible that ‘a revolution can avoid war’. In her view, this is the only ‘feeble possibility’ that we have if we do not want to ‘abandon all hope’. Revolutionary war often turns into the ‘tomb of the revolution’, since ‘the armed citizenry are not given the means of waging war without a controlling apparatus, without police pressure, without a special court, without punishment for desertion’. More than any other social phenomenon, war swells the military, bureaucratic and police apparatus. ‘It leads to the total effacement of the individual before state bureaucracy’. Hence, ‘if the war does not end immediately and permanently [ . . . ] the result will be merely one of those revolutions that, in Marx’s words, perfect the state apparatus instead of shattering it’ or, more clearly still, ‘it would even mean extending under another form the regime we want to suppress’. In the event of war, then, ‘we must choose between obstructing the functioning of the military machine in which we ourselves constitute the cogs, or helping that machine to blindly crush human lives’ (Weil, 2021: 101–102).<sup>9</sup>

For the Left, war cannot be ‘the continuation of politics by other means’, to quote 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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## ORCID iD

Marcello Musto  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0911-5907>

## Notes

1. See Freymond (1962) and Marx (2014: 92): ‘our social institutions as well as the centralization of political power are a permanent cause of war, which can only be removed by a thorough social reform’. A

previous text delivered by the International Working Men's Association to the Congress of Peace in Geneva, held in September 1867, stated that 'to put an end to war, it is not enough to do away with armies, but it is further necessary to change the social organization in the direction of an ever more equitable distribution of production' (Hafner, 2014: 234).

2. This period saw the birth of the idea of 'revolutionary war'. In the short but incisive essay entitled *Reflections on War*, Simone Weil (2021) showed that the ideas on war held by the most radical sections of the Left had very little in common with pacifism and were in fact inspired by the French Revolution. In 1792, France declared war on Austria and it became common to think of exporting revolutionary principles among peoples subject to the obscurantist monarchies that ruled Europe. The Girondins considered the war of 1792 as a crusade for liberty: 'revolutionary war, whether defensive or offensive [was] "not only legitimate but one of the most glorious forms of working-class struggle against oppressors"' (Weil, 2021: 94). Robespierre (1956:129) was more sceptical; however, he realized that war had never freed any foreign people and that 'liberty is not brought at the point of bayonets', He also understood that the propagation of war favoured military despotism and undermined the people's liberty.
3. Some of these points may be compared with Charles Wright Mills's (1956) reflections in *The Power Elite* where the military establishment is viewed as a determining element in bureaucratic rule.
4. At the time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Mikhail Bakunin had also urged the workers to turn patriotic war into revolutionary war (see Musto, 2014: 49).
5. On the polemic between Kropotkin and Malatesta see Adams (2019).
6. While the communist movement saw the Soviet Union as the reference point for the international proletarian revolution, the theory of 'socialism in one country' was taking shape in Moscow. According to the view developed by Bukharin and Stalin in the 1920s, the absolute priority for the communist movement had to be the consolidation of socialism in Russia. In *The Third International after Lenin* (1928), Trotsky (1957: 61) sharply criticized this turn: 'The task of the parties in the Comintern assumes an auxiliary character; their mission is to protect the USSR from intervention and not to fight for the conquest of power'. On the general orientation of the Comintern as well as Soviet foreign policy in this period, see Claudin (1975).
7. Among the voices raised against this policy – and the greatest advocate of an anti-fascist workers' united front – was Leon Trotsky's. In a series of urgent appeals for an anti-fascist united front of the workers' parties, he denounced the Moscow line that 'all the parties in Germany – from the Nazis to the Social Democrats – were only varieties of fascism and were carrying out the same programme' (Trotsky, 1971a: 422).
8. For an independent Soviet-Marxist view of Stalin's policies in the 30s, see Medvedev (1989). On Soviet foreign policy and diplomacy in the interwar period cf. Carr (1964).
9. Weil (2021) concluded her text with these words:

No matter what name it may take – fascism, democracy, or dictatorship of the proletariat – the principal enemy remains the administrative, police, and military apparatus; not the enemy across the border, who is our enemy only to the extent that they are our brothers and sisters' enemy, but the one who claims to be our defender while making us its slaves. In any circumstance, the worst betrayal possible always consists in agreeing to subordinate oneself to this apparatus and trample underfoot, in order to serve it, all human values in oneself and others (p. 103).

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