

The Great European War and Socialism

Pannekoek, Anton
1914

Published in International Socialist Review 15, no. 4, October 1914, and translated by Marcus Hitch. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1914/10/great-european-war.htm>.

Suddenly, like a meteor from the sky or an earthquake, the world-war has broken out over the unsuspecting and terrified nations of Europe. No one thought of war, no one really wanted it, princes and cabinet members were traveling or at bathing places—out came the ultimatum of Austria to the Serbian government, and after a week of strenuous efforts to preserve peace the nations one after the other slid down into the abyss as if drawn by an irresistible fate.

Never before was it made so plain that mankind does not make history according to its own will but is driven by external social forces more powerful than itself. Superficial newspaper writers seek to lay the blame on individual persons. One alleges as the cause of the war the ambition of the German Kaiser; another the criminal frivolity of the Czar; another the jealousy of England. One who views the world from the standpoint of a peasant or shopkeeper asks how is such madness possible? Good-hearted ideologists are astonished that on the high plane of human culture such a senseless butchery of human beings can take place.

They are all ignorant of the real world; they are now just learning that the essence of capitalist society is oppression, hate, world competition, enmity and the rule of force.

The Causes of the War

The socialist, who has learned to understand the essence of capitalism, sees also clearly the cause of this war. It is unnecessary to discuss it at length, here as this was done in our article “*War Against War*” in the I. S. R. for February, 1913. The economic source of imperialism was there laid bare, and it was shown why the states of Europe have formed themselves into two triple alliances; how the mighty industrial development of Germany forces it to acquire more world power, more colonies; how in this attempt it always found England its chief enemy; and how the revolutions in the Balkan peninsula gave the start from which anew a European war threatened to develop. We only need to connect with our former article and take up the thread where we there dropped it.

The Balkan war of 1912 increased the self-respect of the Balkan nations and aroused in them strong national feelings, but did not satisfy them, because all the new boundaries were artificial. Servia, through the jealousy of Austria, was left small and far from the sea. Austria was torn by the antagonism of many nationalities within her own boundaries and feared that the million Servians in Austria would strive for a union with Belgrade.

A democratic autonomy would have won them for Austria, but this did not suit the court, bank and army camarilla in Vienna, and because this ruling clique had at hand all the military resources of a first-class modern state war against the restless foreign Serbs appeared to be the only means for solving the Serbian question at home. The assassination of Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand served as a welcome pretext for this solution of the difficulty.

The attack of Austria on Servia brought first Russia and then Germany to its feet. Russia always plays the role of protector of the Slavic states of the Balkan, yet leaves them in the lurch when it suits her; but she will not permit an extension of power in the Balkans by Austria; for behind Austria stands Germany.

Austria is the advance guard which opens the way for Germany into Asia, where Germany on account of the Baghdad railroad has large capitalist interests. In Asia Minor and Armenia, German and Russian expansion came into contact with each other. It was only by the threats of Germany that the Czar was forced a year ago to desist from a plan to conquer Armenia.

Now, again, Germany demands that he leave Austria isolated and thereby confess his own weakness before all the Asiatic nations. But the Russian army, though absolutely worthless a few years ago, had become in the meantime somewhat improved; the Russian government clique no longer felt itself to be wholly powerless. So out of the advance of Austria (supported by Germany) on the Balkans arose the attack of Russia on Austria and the attack of Germany on Russia. Thus the European war was on, for France stood in a firm alliance with Russia.

Germany could have prevented the war if she had demanded at Vienna some relaxation towards Servia; but she found the occasion favorable for war, especially as she hoped that England would remain neutral, having adjusted the sharpest points of difference by an agreement with her as to Mesopotamia.

Economically considered, the antagonism between Germany and France is not so great as that between Germany and England. In Turkey French capital works fraternally with German. The Baghdad Railroad is a joint undertaking by German and French capital, which even in the struggle for mining concessions in Asia Minor make common cause against the English-American group (Ernest Cassel, Kuhn-Loeb). When there was a lack of capital in Germany in times of the highest industrial prosperity, French capital was sent to Germany. Germany has repeatedly tried to approach closer to France, chiefly for the purpose of getting the rich supplies of French capital for use in her industries and foreign enterprises.

But in the way of this stood the traditional hate for Germany and the hope of revenge for Alsace-Lorraine. Because of this revenge idea the alliance with Russia was formed and billions of the savings of small French capitalists were invested in Russian government bonds. Hence France remained firmly chained to Russia against Germany and forms in this war the strongest and most dangerous foe of the German army.

What positive advantages Germany hoped for out of this war is apparent from its offer to England that it would make no change in the boundaries of Belgium and France in Europe, but would be satisfied with the colonies of these countries, if England would keep out of the conflict. Germany had long had its eye on the Congo state to round out its African possessions. This, together with strategical considerations, was the reason for drawing Belgium into the strife.

The social democratic parliamentarians of Belgium, Vandervelde and his friends, who some years ago were eager to have the Congo state made a Belgian colony, did a

poor service for the Belgian working class by this high play of statesmanship.

But it is a mistake to believe that Germany's attack on Belgium was the reason that led England to take a hand in the war. Had England done nothing and quietly looked on till the power of France and Russia was broken by Germany, then the result would have been that France, disillusioned and left in the lurch, would have made peace quickly, and that thereupon a closer combination of middle European continental powers would have been formed, which would necessarily have turned its attack toward England. Then would have followed the great struggle between the old full-fed wolf, England, and the young hungry wolf, Germany, under far more unfavorable circumstances for England. Hence England had to jump in now to defend its world-position; only it was difficult for the government, because public opinion was against war. But this was changed by the German attack on Belgium, and then the English government was able to coolly declare war.

Thus the world war grew apace. It is not an accidental war, springing up because of a particular object of contention. As some years ago the tension over Morocco brought on the danger of a war the socialist press pointed to the Moroccan mining concessions of Mannesmann Brothers as the object for which German soldiers were to risk their bones. Now the bourgeois press asks the socialists with scorn, "You are always saying that wars are waged only for capitalist interests; where then are the interests of capital here?"

The pure type of an imperialistic war is to be recognized by this: It does not break out on account of a particular object, but arises from the *general* antagonisms of states. These antagonisms are rooted in the competition to win world power or to defend it; and this struggle for world power is nothing else but the struggle of every country to win for its capital colonies, contracts, spheres of influence and favorable opportunities for investment in Asia and Africa. Every country has for a long time felt itself threatened by others because all of them make hostile preparations against one another. Hence every one of them believes itself attacked by the others.

All Germans are convinced with granite firmness that they are only waging a war of defense against an impudent assault of Russia; in France and England the talk is about Germany's insatiable greed for dominion, which would conquer Europe. At the same time every country believes it is protecting culture or some other holy object against foreign barbarians, though in reality they all stick equally deep in capitalist barbarism which ruthlessly sacrifices wealth and human life for world power and capitalist interests.

In this war we see clearer than ever before how powerful imperialism is and how impotent are all peace congresses and peace societies. It is true that the forceful struggle for world-power brings direct advantage to large capital only; but the whole possessing class feels itself in harmony therewith. All contractors, business men, merchants and educated or professional people (engineers, technicians) have the feeling that better business, better positions await them in proportion as their country increases its reputation in the world and as large industry prospers. Hence an imperialistic policy finds a sounding board in the entire propertied class.

Twenty years ago in Germany the liberals and the Catholic Center party were opponents of militarism and the colonial policy; but since the elections of 1907 all opposition of these petty bourgeois circles against policies of violence and force has disappeared. The firm determination, rising at times even to joyous enthusiasm, with which the mass of the German people now enter into the war (and the same determination is seen in Austria, France, Belgium and England) demonstrates that at present the requirement of large *capital* for room to expand *dominates* the spirit

and will of large masses of the people and leads them with compelling force.

But how is it with the proletariat?

The War and the Working Class

The same evolution which makes large capital master of the world also makes the working proletariat the most numerous class of society. This class, which suffers all the wretchedness and oppression of capitalism, but derives no benefits therefrom, also has to bear all the horrors arising from war. If they come home from the war as victors, then capital has the advantages and profits, but they themselves are again the same exploited propertyless proletarians as before.

It is clear then that working men must be opposed to every war. They look upon the proletarians of foreign lands as their brothers, their comrades, but upon the owning class of their own country as their enemies and oppressors. How could they be brought to shoot their brothers at the behest of their enemies? Class-conscious workers desire to carry on the class struggle in order to abolish capitalism and in lieu thereof to establish a cooperative community, a Socialist society.

The Socialist workers of all countries, as well as the labor unions, have repeatedly at their congresses expressed their abhorrence of war and protested against it. Two years ago the great international demonstration at Basel took place. Unfortunately all discussion over the methods of combatting war was omitted out of fear that then the beautiful picture of unanimity would be damaged; *appearance* was put above *essence*, and now it transpires how much weaker the peace power existing in the proletariat is than we then hoped.

The undeveloped workers without class-consciousness are easily stampeded by the old catchwords, love of country and patriotism. But even the more enlightened organized workers fall easily under the influence of the rushing tide of imperialism. In the labor unions, whose struggle always looks only to direct material advantages and neglects great ideals and intellectual development, an opinion is current that raw materials are needed for industry and hence that forcible subjection of tropical countries is in the interest of the working class.

The reformist policy in the most diverse countries aims at an approach toward the progressive and reform-favoring part of the bourgeoisie and in exchange therefor is ready to take part in the administration, to vote budgets, and approve of colonial projects. A backward movement, governed by old bourgeois catchwords, it, too, speaks of patriotism and the duty of working men to defend their fatherland and its "culture."

In Germany the dominance of this reformism was prevented by the traditions of radicalism and by oppression from above. Because the reactionary police state treated workers as men having inferior rights, it aroused their keen resentment, which expressed itself in uncompromising and bitter opposition to the policies of the government. But whoever followed the events attentively could not but notice that here radicalism by no means meant a revolutionary spirit. Behind the large and mechanically repeated revolutionary phrases there was frequently nothing but petty bourgeois Philistinism, which dreaded every fresh initiative, and especially was there a lack of understanding of modern politics.

In "*Vorwärts*" and other newspapers the policies of the government and militarism were criticised according to the old schedule. They scolded the stupidity and ridiculed the incompetence of official personages and tried to convince the bourgeoisie that their politics were unreasonable, that they were making a mistake in building

warships, that their colonies were worthless—in short, that they really would do better to resign and put efficient social democrats at the helm.

This whole method was at bottom an attack on the politics of modern grand capitalism from the petty bourgeois standpoint of “small business” and shows that all understanding of modern political development was lacking. And fitted in with this was the theory which undertook to show in the scientific-organ of the party, the “*Neue Zeit*,” that the doctrine of Marx, that fiery, revolutionary champion, meant a *passive waiting* and that all revolutionary *activity* was nothing but unscientific anarchism.

A small group of social democrats, with more revolutionary sentiments, sought to bring about a *comprehension of imperialism* and the foreign policy of Germany (especially Karl Radek, a young Polish author, and the Socialist newspapers of Leipzig and Bremen.)

They showed that the strength of imperialism is much greater and is rooted much deeper in the owning class than was thought, and that it controls the whole domestic policy; and that it can only be fought by having the proletariat take up with all its might an active, aggressive struggle against it. How can the proletariat conduct this struggle? First, by a thorough enlightenment of the masses, and secondly, by mass action.

When the working masses have become strongly organized and deeply imbued with Socialist doctrine they can by great street demonstrations and by political mass strikes win concessions from their governments and strongly influence their politics. This is especially true with reference to the danger of war outbreaks. While the old radicals continually repeated the phrase, “Governments do not dare to begin war for fear of the proletariat, for war means social revolution,” the revolutionary Left emphasized the fact that the proletariat cannot prevent war by standing pat but only by energetic, active aggression.

For this purpose as soon as danger of war appears and nationalistic demonstrations in favor of war begin to be made the working men should fill the streets in masses and chase away the howlers. If the danger becomes more threatening, the demonstrations must become more energetic; under a general strike the masses must be sent into the streets instead of going to the factory, and for these few days they can live wholly for the great political struggle.

If the government tries to forbid the demonstrations and to prevent them by force, then all the more must they be kept up. Even if thousands thereby perish, what is that compared with the hundreds of thousands who fall in war? And in war they fall for capital, in the street fight they fall for the proletarian cause.

Since the government is always able to maintain peace by some concession in the negotiations, it is quite possible that such devoted sacrifices of the working masses in all large cities would make the government cautious and thus preserve the peace.

All this applies to the German proletariat at the outbreak of the present war. Had the social democratic party firmly resolved to oppose the war with all its might and had it aroused the masses to opposition and shunned no sacrifice, then perhaps this fearful war would have been avoided. A successful action like this would have been at the same time an important victory, a step forward for Socialism.

But whoever has followed the tactics of the German party of late years must entertain strong doubts whether it was capable of such action. Six years ago an attempt at mass activity was begun in the struggle for the Prussian franchise, but it was soon dropped, because the leaders of the party were afraid of a clash with the powerful military.

Had this beginning of revolutionary aggression continued, then the German government would have had too much to do with its internal troubles to think about war. The fact that this tactic came to an end after the brilliant conflicts of 1910 means an acknowledgment of its own weakness by the party. Since then a lukewarm spirit, adverse to sharp conflict, got the upper hand in the movement. The bureaucracy at the top became ever stronger and was disinclined to risk itself in revolutionary struggles.

It is true, there was an external growth of the organization, which is the necessary prerequisite for a fight, but at the same time they shunned that fight more and more in order, as they claimed, not to endanger this precious organization. Every independent initiative of the masses which occasionally broke out in the struggles of the labor unions against the counsel of the leaders was branded as a "lack of discipline" and "anarchism." Thus there was lacking in the German labor movement all the prerequisites for coming out boldly against the threatening war.

To expect from narrow parliamentarians and bureaucrats like Scheidemann and Ebert any revolutionary initiative would have been ridiculous, and just as little could one expect that the masses, accustomed to do only what the party ordered, would now come forward independently without the leaders of the party.

On Tuesday evening, the 28th of July, well attended meetings were held to protest against the war. That was all. And in these meetings there was a total lack of enthusiasm. With a feeling of depression, they realized that Fate was approaching without being able to stop it.

But there was not only lack of capacity for action against the war. The question *how* the war could be resisted was never even raised, because the question *whether* the war ought to be resisted was not even answered with a decisive *Yes*. Among the workers was a lack of spirit to come out against the war. More than that, in wide circles, even among party members, they were for the war. In the "*Vorwärts*" and many other party papers the war was set forth as a "war against the blood-czar," a war against Russian barbarism. They cited Karl Marx, who in 1848 had urged Germany to a war against Russia; they overlooked the fact that that applied only so long as Russia dominated and threatened Europe as its most powerful military state.

Thus the war was made popular among the working masses. In vain did a few newspapers of the Left lift their voice against it. Here is shown how heavily the non-comprehension of imperialism revenged itself. Had there been everywhere a clear insight into the fact that today Russia, equally with Germany, is a capitalist country, pursuing a policy of commercial imperialism, and that the war was to be waged merely about the expansion of Germany in Asia, and had this truth been hammered into the masses by our press day in and day out, then the workers would not so easily have become the victims of bourgeois patriotic phrases.

Now, however, it appeared to the workers, who had always learned to hate most of all the gruesome Russian czarism, that the German government, which formerly cultivated an intimate friendship with the czar's regime, had really been converted to the views of the proletariat in order to wipe out that disgrace of Europe, the bloody rule of the Cossack lash. Hence, it could not occur to the undeveloped mass of the German workers to hold back the German government from the war against Russia. Hence the little band who feared the war as a great evil could do nothing.

This explains why the social democratic members of the Reichstag (only a small minority opposed it) voted the emergency war credit for the government under the plea that Germany was conducting a defensive war for civilization against Russian

barbarism.

This position of the German social democracy marks a turning point in its history and a breach with its previous tactics. (In 1870 in a similar case Bebel and Liebknecht abstained from voting, and Bebel declared later that he would have voted against the war appropriation if he had dreamed of Bismarck's deception as to Napoleon's alleged attack.)

From lack of courage and strength for resistance, they now fell willingly into the trap which the government had set for the people, viz., that it was merely waging a war of defense against an impudent assault. There was also the fear that if the party voted against the war appropriation, it would call down the wrath of public opinion, and suffer violence through the arrest of its leaders and the suppression of its party papers by the government. They avoided a clash for fear of injuring the organization.

These representatives of the party now think that by their prudence they saved the party organization. Superficially considered, they appear to be in the right, for the party is now treated from *above* more favorably than ever before; but the *socialist soul has thereby been sacrificed*.

The bourgeois press praises the social democracy for its patriotic stand. The whole position of the party in the country has changed; it is now recognized by the government as on an equal footing with other parties; the numerous exceptional laws against it are repealed; all is friendship and unity between social democracy and bourgeoisie. The class struggle against the bourgeoisie is heard no more; the Socialist backbone of the party is broken.

Many a one will ask himself, how could there be such a collapse of the once so proud and class-conscious party, the strongest and most radical in the world? We have already said that within the party the symptoms of a change were long present, but did not come to the surface owing to the force of tradition and old habituated phrases. But in stormy social crises, when the passions of men are stirred to the depths, the venerable catchwords fall suddenly away like a torn cloak and *what one really is*, what lies in one's deepest nature, is unexpectedly revealed.

The leaders of the party, parliamentarians and officeholders, were averse to keen strife and, though retaining the Marxian expressions, had repeatedly sought in elections to let the party cooperate with the liberal progressives. And the masses, thanks to a twenty-year economic prosperity, had gradually become demoralized.

True, large numbers became members of the Socialist party, because they looked upon this as the class party of the workers, and they were also for the most part opposed to political compromises, because they were socially and politically heavily oppressed. But there were few indications of deep revolutionary feeling of a really rebellious spirit. The history of the labor movement shows how in times of crisis the revolutionary spirit grows, in times of prosperity contentment. Hence, people wondered why the long and great prosperity showed so little effect on the political attitude of the German workers. The answer is found in the present collapse, the sudden submission to imperialism and the fraternization with the bourgeoisie.

Of course, this will not last forever. Government and bourgeoisie are now so friendly to the workers only because they need them badly, because in so dangerous a war they must rely on the good opinion of the masses. Soon enough this condition will change and when the necessities of the government are past, the persecutions will begin again. But when that comes the party cannot simply turn back again to its old ways. The scars of this unnatural war compact will remain.

It is not impossible that a portion of the party will abandon permanently the class struggle and that sharp inner conflicts and divisions will arise out of it. But what course the labor movement will take in the future cannot be determined until the results of the present war are clearly seen.