

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Movements > World level (Movements) > Internationals (socialist, communist, revolutionary) (Movements, World) > International (Second) (1889-1914) (Movements, World) > **One hundred years ago: Two calls to struggle against the First World War**

One hundred years ago: Two calls to struggle against the First World War

Monday 10 November 2014, by [LENIN Vladimir](#), [RIDDELL John](#), [TROTSKY Leon](#) / [TROTSKI Léon](#) / [TROTSKY Léon](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2014).

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, 100 years ago, two Russian socialist leaders, V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, published antiwar manifestos that greatly influenced the international socialist response to the conflict.

Contents

- [The Tasks of Revolutionary \(...\)](#)
- [The Revolutionary Epoch](#)

Lenin's appeal, "The Tasks of Revolutionary Social Democracy in the European War," republished below, was adopted by a meeting of exiled members of the Russian socialism's Bolshevik current in Bern, Switzerland, in early September 1914. (The term Social Democracy then was used to designate for the socialist movement as a whole.) Trotsky's text, "The Revolutionary Epoch," also below, was written in October, as part of his pamphlet War and the International. It was published in *Golos*, a Paris daily newspaper edited by the Menshevik Julius Martov, starting in November 1914.

Initially, both texts reached only a limited audience. Even so, their publication was a major event for the socialist movement that had been devastated by the outbreak of war in August. The socialist International had collapsed ignominiously that month, as its major parties—Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, and Great Britain—pledged support to their national ruling classes in prosecuting the murderous conflict.

Socialists who remained loyal to their movement's antiwar program were hard hit by their parties' betrayal and by the impact of censorship and repression. In Germany, for example, it wasn't until December that the antiwar socialists were able to make a public declaration.

Russian socialists responded more quickly. It was many weeks before any copies of either Lenin's or Trotsky's appeals made their way to Russia. However, socialists working underground in Russia did not wait for direction from their émigré leadership—they circulated several militant antiwar statements in the first days of the war. During 1915, the positions advanced by Trotsky and Lenin became identified with two parallel currents of antiwar socialism.

Their texts were identical in their fundamental thrust, opposing the imperialist war and the annexations and reparations demanded by the warring countries. They both demanded national self-determination and called for a republican United States of Europe. But the appeals advanced differing orientations for struggle.

Each drew inspiration from a different phrase in a single sentence of the antiwar appeal adopted by

three prewar international socialist congresses. The sentence in question stated that socialists' duty in a European war was to "intervene for its speedy termination and to strive with all their power to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule" [1]. This is additional text.

Taking his cue from the words "intervene for speedy termination," Trotsky called for socialists to rally for "an immediate cessation of the war." Lenin, by contrast, focused on the need to utilize the wartime crisis for a revolutionary struggle against the "reactionary and bourgeois governments," an approach which soon led him to call for "conversion of the present imperialist war into a civil war."

Trotsky's text stands as a celebrated portrayal of the world war's impact on workers in Europe. Lenin offered a chiseled, condensed action program. Both positions were presented at the historic September 1915 international socialist antiwar conference in Zimmerwald, Switzerland. Lenin and Trotsky later joined with supporters of both views in carrying out the Russian Revolution.

John Riddell

The Tasks of Revolutionary Social Democracy in the European War

V.I. Lenin

Resolution of a Group of Social Democrats

1. The European and world war has the clearly defined character of a bourgeois, imperialist and dynastic war. A struggle for markets and for freedom to loot foreign countries, a striving to suppress the revolutionary movement of the proletariat and democracy in the individual countries, a desire to deceive, disunite, and slaughter the proletarians of all countries by setting the wage slaves of one nation against those of another so as to benefit the bourgeoisie—these are the only real content and significance of the war.

2. The conduct of the leaders of the German Social-Democratic Party, the strongest and the most influential in the Second International (1889-1914), a party which has voted for war credits and repeated the bourgeois-chauvinist phrases of the Prussian Junkers and the bourgeoisie, is sheer betrayal of socialism. Under no circumstances can the conduct of the leaders of the German Social-Democratic Party be condoned, even if we assume that the party was absolutely weak and had temporarily to bow to the will of the bourgeois majority of the nation. This party has in fact adopted a national-liberal policy.

3. The conduct of the Belgian and French Social-Democratic party leaders, who have betrayed socialism by entering bourgeois governments, is just as reprehensible.

4. The betrayal of socialism by most leaders of the Second International (1889-1914) signifies the ideological and political bankruptcy of the International. This collapse has been mainly caused by the actual prevalence in it of petty-bourgeois opportunism, the bourgeois nature and the danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries. The opportunists had long been preparing to wreck the Second International by denying the socialist revolution and substituting bourgeois reformism in its stead, by rejecting the class

struggle with its inevitable conversion at certain moments into civil war, and by preaching class collaboration; by preaching bourgeois chauvinism under the guise of patriotism and the defense of the fatherland, and ignoring or rejecting the fundamental truth of socialism, long ago set forth in the Communist Manifesto, that the workingmen have no country; by confining themselves, in the struggle against militarism, to a sentimental philistine point of view, instead of recognizing the need for a revolutionary war by the proletarians of all countries, against the bourgeoisie of all countries; by making a fetish of the necessary utilization of bourgeois parliamentarianism and bourgeois legality, and forgetting that illegal forms which has long taken a national liberal stand, is very properly celebrating its victory over European socialism. The so-called Centre of the German and other Social-Democratic parties has in actual fact faint-heartedly capitulated to the opportunists. It must be the task of the future International resolutely and irrevocably to rid itself of this bourgeois trend in socialism.

5. With reference to the bourgeois and chauvinist sophisms being used by the bourgeois parties and the governments of the two chief rival nations of the Continent—the German and the French—to fool the masses most effectively, and being copied by both the overt and covert socialist opportunists, who are slavishly following in the wake of the bourgeoisie, one must particularly note and brand the following:

When the German bourgeois refer to the defense of the fatherland and to the struggle against tsarism, and insist on the freedom of cultural and national development, they are lying, because it has always been the policy of Prussian Junkerdom, headed by Wilhelm II, and the big bourgeoisie of Germany, to defend the tsarist monarchy; whatever the outcome of the war, they are sure to try to bolster it. They are lying because, in actual fact, the Austrian bourgeoisie have launched a robber campaign against Serbia, and the German bourgeoisie are oppressing Danes, Poles, and Frenchmen (in Alsace-Lorraine); they are waging a war of aggression against Belgium and France so as to loot the richer and freer countries; they have organized an offensive at a moment which seemed best for the use of the latest improvements in military matériel, and on the eve of the introduction of the so-called big military program in Russia.

Similarly, when the French bourgeois refer to the defense of the fatherland, etc., they are lying, because in actual fact they are defending countries that are backward in capitalist technology and are developing more slowly, and because they spend thousands of millions to hire Russian Tsarism's Black-Hundred gangs for a war of aggression, i.e., the looting of Austrian and German lands.

Neither of the two belligerent groups of nations is second to the other in cruelty and atrocities in warfare.

6. It is the first and foremost task of Russian Social-Democrats to wage a ruthless and all-out struggle against Great-Russian and tsarist-monarchist chauvinism, and against the sophisms used by the Russian liberals, Cadets, a section of the Narodniks, and other bourgeois parties, in defense of that chauvinism. From the viewpoint of the working class and the toiling masses of all the peoples of Russia, the defeat of the tsarist monarchy and its army, which oppress Poland, the Ukraine, and many other peoples of Russia, and foment hatred among the peoples so as to increase Great-Russian oppression of the other nationalities, and consolidate the reactionary and barbarous government of the tsar's monarchy, would be the lesser evil by far.

7. The following must now be the slogans of Social-Democracy:

First, all-embracing propaganda, involving the army and the theatre of hostilities as well, for the socialist revolution and the need to use weapons, not against their brothers, the wage slaves in other countries, but against the reactionary and bourgeois governments and parties of all countries; the

urgent necessity of organizing illegal nuclei and groups in the armies of all nations, to conduct such propaganda, in all languages; a merciless struggle against the chauvinism and "patriotism" of the philistines and bourgeoisie of all countries without exception. In the struggle against the leaders of the present International, who have betrayed socialism, it is imperative to appeal to the revolutionary consciousness of the working masses, who bear the entire burden of the war and are in most cases hostile to opportunism and chauvinism.

Secondly, as an immediate slogan, propaganda for republics in (Germany, Poland, Russia, and other countries, and for the transforming of all the separate states of Europe into a republican United States of Europe.

Thirdly and particularly, a struggle against the tsarist monarchy and Great-Russian, Pan-Slavist chauvinism, and advocacy of a revolution in Russia, as well as of the liberation of and self-determination for nationalities oppressed by Russia, coupled with the immediate slogans of a democratic republic, the confiscation of the landed estates, and an eight-hour working day.

(signed:) A group of Social-Democrats, members of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party

Written no later than September 6, 1914. The text has been taken from the Marxists Internet Archive [2], where it is accompanied by footnotes by Progress Publishers.

The Revolutionary Epoch

Leon Trotsky

The epoch of the awakening, the enlightenment, and the organization of the working-class revealed that it has tremendous resources of revolutionary energy that found no adequate employment in the daily struggle. The Social Democracy summoned the upper strata of the proletariat into the field, but it also checked their revolutionary energy by adopting the tactics it was obliged to adopt, the tactics of waiting ("attrition"), the strategy of letting your opponent exhaust himself. The character of this period was so prolonged and reactionary that it did not allow the Social Democracy the opportunity to give the proletariat tasks that would have engaged their entire spirit of sacrifice. Imperialism is now giving the proletariat such tasks. And imperialism attained its object by pushing the proletariat into a position of "national defence." To the workers, this meant the defence of all that their hands had created, not only the immense wealth of the nation, but also their own class organizations, their treasuries, their press, in short, everything they had struggled for, untiringly and painfully, and achieved in the course of several decades. Imperialism violently threw society off its balance, destroyed the sluice-gates built by the Social Democracy to regulate the current of proletarian revolutionary energy, and guided this current into its own bed.

But this terrific historical experiment, which at one blow broke the back of the Socialist International, carries a deadly danger for bourgeois society itself. The hammer is wrenched out of the worker's hand and replaced by a gun. And the worker, who has been tied down by the machinery of the capitalist system, is suddenly torn from his usual setting and taught to place the aims of society above happiness at home and even life itself.

Holding in his hand the weapon he himself has forged, the worker is put in a position where the

political destiny of the state is directly dependent upon him. Those who in normal times exploited and scorned him, now flatter him and toady to him. At the same time he comes into intimate contact with the cannon, which Lassalle called one of the most important elements in every constitution. He crosses the border, takes part in forceful requisitions, and helps in the transfer of cities from one party to another. Changes are taking place such as the present generation has never before seen.

Even though the vanguard of the working class knew in theory that might makes right, still their political thinking was completely permeated by the spirit of opportunism, of adaptation to bourgeois legalism. Now they are learning from life to despise this legalism and tear it down. Now the static forces in their psychology are replaced by dynamic ones. The great guns are hammering into their heads the idea that if it is impossible to get around an obstacle, it is possible to destroy it. Almost the entire adult male population is going through this school of war, so terrible in its realism, a school which is forming a new human type. Iron necessity is now shaking its fist at all the rules of bourgeois society, at its laws, its morality, its religion. "Necessity knows no law," said the German Chancellor on August 4 [1914]. Monarchs walk about in public places calling each other liars in the language of market women; governments repudiate their solemnly acknowledged obligations; and the national church ties its God to the national cannon like a criminal condemned to hard labour. Is it not clear that all these circumstances must bring about a profound change in the mental attitude of the working class, curing them radically of the hypnosis of legality in which a period of political stagnation expresses itself?

The possessing classes, to their consternation, will soon have to recognize this change. A working class that has been through the school of war will feel the need of using the language of force as soon as the first serious obstacle faces them within their own country. "Necessity knows no law," the workers will cry when the attempt is made to hold them back at the command of bourgeois law. And poverty, the terrible poverty that prevails during this war and will continue after its close, will be such as to force the masses to violate many a bourgeois law. The general economic exhaustion in Europe will affect the proletariat most immediately and most severely. The war will deplete the state's material resources, and there will be very little possibility of satisfying the demands of the working masses. This must lead to profound political conflicts, which, ever widening and deepening, may take on the character of a social revolution, the progress and outcome of which no one, of course, can now foresee.

On the other hand, the war, with its armies of millions and its hellish weapons of destruction, can exhaust not only society's resources but also the moral forces of the proletariat. If it does not meet internal resistance, this war may last for several years more, with changing fortunes on both sides, until the chief belligerents are completely exhausted. But then the whole fighting energy of the international proletariat, brought to the surface by the bloody conspiracy of imperialism, will be completely consumed in the horrible work of mutual annihilation. The outcome would be that our entire civilization would be set back by many decades. A peace resulting not from the will of the awakened peoples but from the mutual exhaustion of the belligerents, would be like the peace with which the Balkan War was concluded; it would be a Bucharest Peace extended to the whole of Europe.

Such a peace would seek to patch up anew the contradictions, antagonisms and deficiencies that have led to the present war. And, along with many other things, the socialist work of two generations would vanish in a sea of blood without leaving a trace behind.

Which of the two prospects is the more probable? This cannot possibly be theoretically determined in advance. The issue depends entirely upon the activity of the vital forces of society—above all upon the revolutionary Social Democracy.

“Immediate cessation of the war” is the slogan under which the Social Democracy can reassemble its scattered ranks, both within the national parties, and in the whole International. The proletariat cannot make its will to peace dependent upon the strategic considerations of the general staffs. On the contrary, it must oppose its desire for peace to these military considerations. What the warring governments call a struggle for national self-preservation is in reality a mutual national annihilation. Real national self-defence now consists in the struggle for peace.

Such a struggle for peace means for us not only a fight to save humanity’s material and cultural possessions from further insane destruction. It is for us primarily a fight to preserve the revolutionary energy of the proletariat.

To assemble the ranks of the proletariat in a fight for peace means to confront against frenzied imperialism once again, all down the line, with the forces of revolutionary socialism.

The conditions upon which peace should be concluded—the peace of the people themselves, and not the reconciliation of the diplomats—must be the same for the whole International.

No reparations!

The right to every nation to self-determination!

The United States of Europe—without monarchies, without standing armies, without ruling feudal castes, without secret diplomacy!

Agitation for peace, which must be conducted using all the means now at the disposal of Social Democracy as well as those which, with a will, it could acquire, will not only tear the workers out of their nationalistic hypnosis; it will also do the rescue work of inner purification in the present official parties of the proletariat. The national revisionists and the socialist patriots in the Second International, who have been exploiting for national militaristic aims the influence that socialism has acquired over the working masses, must be thrust back into the camp of the enemies of the working class by uncompromising revolutionary agitation for peace.

Now more than ever, revolutionary Social Democracy need not fear isolation. The war is making the most terrible agitation against itself. Every day that the war lasts will bring new masses of people to our banner, if it is an honest banner of peace and democracy. The surest way by which the Social Democracy can isolate the militaristic reaction in Europe and force it to take the offensive is by the slogan of peace.

Written October 31, 1914. The text has been taken from the Marxists Internet Archive [3] and edited on the basis of a comparison with the German version [4].

P.S.

*

<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/100-years-ago-two-calls-to-struggle-against-the-world-war/>

Footnotes

[1] for more on the origin of the prewar appeal, see my previous article "[100 years ago: Capitalism's world war and the battle against it](#)", available on ESSF (article 32707).

[2] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/aug/x01.htm>

[3] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1914/war/part3.htm#ch1>

[4] <http://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/trotzki/1914/kriegint/kap07.htm>