



Bolshevism

and the war of 1914-1918



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(Important quotations from Lenin's Works.)

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Warning!

We have systematically replaced the author's translation of Lenin's quotations from the Russian edition of the Collected Works by the corresponding one in the Second English Edition, which explains possible differences.

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During the period of the war of 1914—1918 bolshevism formulated and developed in a more detailed manner the Marxian point of view on war, which it had previously defended within the 2nd International. In the main, what was said by Bolshevism in 1914—1918 holds good also at the present moment.

We, therefore, summarize what Lenin said in 1914—1918.

1. The Evaluation of War.

How can the nature of wars be evaluated? War cannot be regarded as an isolated fact. The words of Clausewitz: “*War is the continuation of politics by other (namely: violent) means*” may be considered as a correct expression of Leninist point of view.

“Apply this view to the present war. You will see that for decades, for almost half a century, the governments and the ruling classes of Britain and France, Germany and Italy, Austria and Russia have pursued a policy of plundering colonies, oppressing other nations, and suppressing the working-class movement. It is this, and only this, policy that is being continued in the present war. In particular, the policy of both Austria and Russia, in peacetime as well as in wartime, is a policy of enslaving nations, not of liberating them”. (LCW, 21:304, 2nd Ed.)

Thus, it is evident that not one contemporary imperialist state can wage any war, other than an imperialist war.

“To be able to do this, socialists must first of all tell the people the truth, namely, that this war is, in three respects, a war between slaveholders with the aim of consolidating slavery. This is a war, firstly, to increase the enslavement of the colonies by means of a ‘more equitable’ distribution and subsequent more concerted exploitation of them; secondly, to

increase the oppression of other nations within the 'Great' Powers, since *both Austria and Russia* (Russia in greater-degree and with results far worse than Austria) maintain their rule only by such oppression, intensifying it by means of war; and thirdly, to increase and prolong wage slavery, since the proletariat is split up and suppressed, while the capitalists are the gainers, making fortunes out of the war, fanning national prejudices and intensifying reaction, which has raised its head in all countries, even in the freest and most republican". (LCW, 21:303-304, 2nd Ed.)

Can the argument about a defensive war, which would the Socialists to stake the stand of defending their "father-land", be applied to such a war? No, it cannot. In a war waged by imperialist countries it does not matter, *who began first*.

Marxism conceived as a defensive war that kind of war, when a country with a progressive social structure fights against a reactionary country. So it was, for instance, in the period of the Napoleonic wars. In our times, not only the struggle of the colonies for liberation from the yoke of imperialists should be included in this category, but also other cases (see Bukharin's speech on the imperialist war at ECCI Plenum).

"For example, if tomorrow, Morocco were to declare war on France, or India on Britain, or Persia or China on Russia, and so on, these would be 'just', and 'defensive' wars,

irrespective of who would be the first to attack; any socialist would wish the oppressed, dependent and unequal states victory over the oppressor, slaveholding and predatory 'Great' Powers.

But imagine a slave-holder who owns 100 slaves warring against another who owns 200 slaves, for a more 'just' redistribution of slaves. The use of the term of a 'defensive' war, or a war "for the defense of the fatherland", would clearly be historically false in such a case and would in practice be sheer deception of the common people, philistines, and the ignorant, by the astute slave-holders. It is in this way that the peoples are being deceived with 'national' ideology and the term of 'defense of the fatherland', by the present-day imperialist bourgeoisie, in the war now being waged between slave-holders with the purpose of consolidating slavery". (LCW, 21:300-301, 2nd Ed.)

Does this mean that in the present epoch only imperialist wars are possible? No, it does not mean that, in view of the fact that capitalism develops irregularly, that along with the imperialist countries there are in existence colonial and semi-colonial countries.

"Further. National wars waged by colonies and semi-colonies in the imperialist era are not only probable but *inevitable*. About 1,000 million people, or *over half* of the world's

population, live in the colonies and semi-colonies (China, Turkey, Persia). The national liberation movements there are either already very strong, or are growing and maturing. Every war is the continuation of politics by other means. The continuation of national liberation politics in the colonies will *inevitably* take the form of national wars *against* imperialism. Such wars might lead to an imperialist war of the present “great” imperialist powers, but on the other hand they might not. It will depend on many factors”. (LCW, 22:310, 2nd Ed.)

What is the nature of these wars?

“National wars against the imperialist powers are not only possible and probable; they are inevitable, *progressive* and *revolutionary* though of course, to be *successful*, they require either the concerted effort of huge numbers of people in the oppressed countries (hundreds of millions in our example of India and China), or a *particularly* favorable conjuncture of international conditions (e.g., the fact that the imperialist powers cannot interfere, being paralyzed by exhaustion, by war, by their antagonism, etc.), or the *simultaneous* uprising of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie in one of the big powers (this latter eventuality holds first place as the most desirable and favorable for the victory of the proletariat)”. (LCW, 22:312, 2nd Ed.)

It is the duty not only of the Socialists of these countries, but even more so of the Socialists of the imperialist countries to support this “just war”.

“A war *against* imperialist, i.e., oppressing, powers by oppressed (for example, colonial) nations is a genuine national war. It is possible today too. ‘Defense of the fatherland’ in a war waged by an oppressed nation against a foreign oppressor is not a deception. Socialists are *not* opposed to ‘defense of the fatherland’ in *such* a war”. (LCW, 23:34, 2nd Ed.)

“On closer examination, this slogan will be found to mean a ‘class truce’, the renunciation of the class struggle by the oppressed classes in all belligerent countries, since the class struggle is impossible without dealing blows at one’s ‘own’ bourgeoisie, one’s ‘own’ government, whereas dealing a blow at one’s own government in wartime is (for Bukvoyed’s information) high treason, means contributing to the defeat of one’s own country”. (LCW, 21:278-279, 2nd Ed.)

Such were also the tactical slogans of Bolshevism:

The main Bolshevik slogan was: *Convert the imperialist war into civil war!* This slogan was the logical outcome of those decisions of the International which obliged us to retaliate on war by an energetic class struggle. It is the only real slogan, because only the proletarian revolution can bring about real peace.

The defeat slogan was the concrete form of this:

“A revolution in wartime means civil war; the conversion of a war between governments into a civil war is, on the one hand, facilitated by military reverses (‘defeats’) of governments; on the other hand, one cannot actually strive for such a conversion without thereby facilitating defeat.

The reason why the chauvinist (including the Organizing Committee and the Chkheidze group) repudiate the defeat ‘slogan’ is that this slogan alone implies a consistent call for revolutionary action against one’s own government in wartime. Without such action, millions of ultra-revolutionary phrases such as a war against ‘the war and the conditions, etc.’ are not worth a brass farthing.

Anyone who would in all earnest refute the ‘slogan’ of defeat for one’s own government in the imperialist war should prove one of three things: (1) that the war of 1914-15 is not reactionary, or (2) that a revolution stemming from that war is impossible, or (3) that co-ordination and mutual aid are impossible between revolutionary movements in all the belligerent countries”. (LCW, 21:276, 2nd Ed.)

Is not the slogan of defeat of *all belligerent imperialist countries* an absurdity?

“Only a bourgeois who believes that a war started by governments must necessarily end as a war between governments, and wants it to end as such, can regard as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘absurd’

the idea that the socialists of *all* the belligerent countries should express their wish that *all* their 'own' governments should be defeated. On the contrary, it is a statement of this kind that would be in keeping with the innermost thoughts of every class-conscious worker, and be in line with our activities for the conversion of the imperialist war into a civil war". (LCW, 21:315, 2nd Ed.)

The defeat slogan is of course a slogan of high treason, if we regard it from the bourgeois point of view, but the peace slogan is elementary if we regard it from a revolutionary, internationalist point of view.

"When, before the war, the Italian Social-Democrats raised the question of a mass strike, the bourgeoisie replied, no doubt correctly from their *own* point of view, that this would be high treason, and that Social-Democrats would be dealt with as traitors. That is true, just as it is true that fraternization in the trenches is high treason. Those who write against 'high treason', as Bukvoved does, or against the 'disintegration of Russia', as Semkovsky does, are adopting the bourgeois, not the proletarian point of view. A proletarian *cannot* deal a class blow at his government or hold out (in fact) a hand to his brother, the proletarian of the 'foreign' country which is at war with 'our side', *without committing* 'high treason', *without contributing* to the defeat, to the *disintegration* of his 'own', imperialist 'Great' Power." (LCW, 21:279, 2nd Ed.)

Lenin regarded this slogan particularly applicable to tsarist Russia.

“This holds particularly true in respect of Russia. A victory for Russia will bring in its train a strengthening of reaction, both throughout the world and within the country, and will be accompanied by the complete enslavement of the peoples living in areas already seized. In view of this, we consider the defeat of Russia the lesser evil in all conditions”. (LCW, 21:163, 2nd Ed.)



2. Militant Anti-War Slogans.

What Should be the tactics of a workers party? Workers parties cannot support an imperialist war, vote war credits, participate in various organizations in support of the imperialist governments, without historically betraying the interests of the working class. The Bolsheviki for instance conducted a big campaign against participation in the War Industrial Committees, and thanks to their agitation the workers of Petersburg and other towns rejected the Menshevik proposals to send representatives to the War Industrial Committees.

But the substance of Bolshevik criticism was directed not so much against Socialist jingoism as against the centre. Bolshevism submitted the *peace slogan* to severe criticism. The peace slogan taken isolated from concrete condition, without concrete definition and “absolutely”, was in Lenin’s opinion another form of Social-patriotism. To advocate the slogan of peace means to:

“deceive the people with admitting the idea that a peace without annexations, without oppression of nations, without plunder, and without the embryo of new wars among the present governments and ruling classes, is possible in the absence of a revolutionary movement. Such deception of the people would merely mean playing into the hands of the secret diplomacy of the belligerent

governments and facilitating their counterrevolutionary plans. Whoever wants a lasting and democratic peace must stand for civil war against the governments and the bourgeoisie”. (LCW, 21:316, 2nd Ed.)

Here is the Bolshevik “Peace Programme”:

“Finally, our ‘peace programme’ must explain that the imperialist powers and the imperialist bourgeoisie *cannot* grant a democratic peace. Such a peace *must* be sought for and fought for, not in the *past*, not in a reactionary utopia of a *non-imperialist* capitalism, not in a league of equal nations *under* capitalism, but *in the future*, in the socialist revolution of the proletariat. Not a single fundamental democratic demand can be achieved to any considerable extent, or with any degree of permanency, in the advanced imperialist states, except through revolutionary battles under the banner of socialism.

Whoever promises the nations a ‘democratic’ peace, without at the same time preaching the socialist revolution, or while repudiating the struggle for it — a struggle now, during the war — is deceiving the proletariat”. (LCW, 22:167-168, 2nd Ed.)

Secondly, Bolshevism also sharply criticized the pacifist slogan (which was partly also adopted by some “Lefts”) advocated by the centrists, — the slogan of *disarmament*. Bolshevism was against that slogan because it was utopian as a demand directed

to the imperialists. The disarmament slogan is identical with:

“That is tantamount to complete abandonment of the class-struggle point of view, to renunciation of all thought of revolution. Our slogan must be: arming of the proletariat to defeat, expropriate and disarm the bourgeoisie. These are the only tactics possible for a revolutionary class, tactics that follow logically from, and are dictated by, the whole objective development of capitalist militarism. Only after the proletariat has disarmed the bourgeoisie will it be able, without betraying its world-historic mission, to consign all armaments to the scrap heap. And the proletariat will undoubtedly do this, but only when this condition has been fulfilled, certainly not before”. (LCW, 23:96-97, 2nd Ed.)

“The Kautskyite advocacy of ‘disarmament’, which is addressed to the present governments of the imperialist Great Powers, is the most vulgar opportunism, it is bourgeois pacifism, which *actually* — in spite of the ‘good Intentions’ of the sentimental Kautskyites — serves to distract the workers from the revolutionary struggle”. (LCW, 23:96, 2nd Ed.)

This slogan is a rejection of revolutionary Marxism:

“But whoever expects that socialism will be achieved without a social revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat is not a socialist.

Dictatorship is state power based directly on violence. And in the twentieth century — as in the age of civilization generally — violence means neither a fist nor a club, but troops. To put “disarmament” in the programme is tantamount to making the general declaration: We are opposed to the use of arms”. (LCW, 23:95, 2nd Ed.)

Thirdly, Bolshevism also sharply criticized the slogan: “Neither victory nor defeat”. This pacifist slogan meant the rejection of the revolutionary struggle and was nothing but a paraphrasing of the “*national defense*” slogan.

“It means shifting the issue to the level of a war between governments (who, according to the content of this slogan, are to keep to their old stand, ‘retain their positions’), and not to the level of the struggle of the oppressed classes against their governments! It means justifying the chauvinism of all the imperialist nations, whose bourgeoisie are always ready to say — and do say to the people—that they are ‘only’ fighting ‘against defeat’. ‘The significance of our August 4 vote was that we are not for war but against defeat’, David, a leader of the opportunists, writes in his book. The Organizing Committee, together with Bukvoved and Trotsky, stand on *fully* the same ground as David when they defend the ‘neither-victory-nor-defeat’ slogan”. (LCW, 21:278, 2nd Ed.)



3. Conclusion — Methods of Struggle.

What are the means and methods of preparing the realization of the slogan to convert the imperialist war into a civil war? The Conference of the Bolshevik Sections Abroad, held at the beginning of 1915, pointed out:

“The following should be indicated as the first steps towards converting the present imperialist war into a civil war: (1) an absolute refusal to vote for war credits, and resignation from bourgeois governments; (2) a complete break with the policy of a class truce (*bloc national, Burgfrieden*); (3) formation of an underground organisation wherever the governments and the bourgeoisie abolish constitutional liberties by introducing martial law; (4) support for fraternization between soldiers of the belligerent nations, in the trenches and on battlefields in general; (5) support for every kind of revolutionary mass action by the proletariat in general.” (LCW, 21:161, 2nd Ed.)

Lenin devoted special attention to the last *three* points.

The creation of real revolutionary organizations capable to carry on a decisive struggle he regarded as a *necessary condition* in any war against war. That is why he raised the question of splicing the *Social Democratic Parties* from the very beginning.

“This is no chance occurrence. The building of a revolutionary organisation must be begun — that is demanded by the new historical situation, by the epoch of proletarian revolutionary action — but it can be begun only *over the heads* of the old leaders, the stranglers of revolutionary energy, *over the heads* of the old party, through its *destruction*.” (LCW, 21:252-253, 2nd ed. Lenin’s italics.)

Lenin outlined very clearly in his pamphlet *The Collapse of the 2nd International* what the new type of revolutionary organisation of the workers ought to be.

“Take the army of today. It is a good example of organisation. This organisation is good only because it is *flexible* and is able at the same time to give millions of people *a single will*. Today these millions are living in their homes in various parts of the country; tomorrow mobilisation is ordered, and they report for duty. Today they lie in the trenches, and this may go on for months; tomorrow they are led to the attack in another order. Today they perform miracles in sheltering from bullets and shrapnel; tomorrow they perform miracles in hand-to-hand-combat. Today their advance detachments lay minefields; tomorrow they advance scores of miles guided by airmen flying overhead. When, in the pursuit of a single aim and animated by a single will, millions alter the forms of their communication and their behavior, change the place and the mode of

their activities, change their tools and weapons in accordance with the changing conditions and the requirements of the struggle — all this is genuine organisation.

The same holds true for the working-class struggle against the bourgeoisie. Today there is no revolutionary situation, the conditions that cause unrest among the masses or heighten their activities do not exist; today you are given a ballot paper—take it, learn to organize so as to use it as a weapon against your enemies, not as a means of getting cushy legislative jobs for men who cling to their parliamentary seats for fear of having to go to prison. Tomorrow your ballot paper is taken from you and you are given a rifle or a splendid and most up-to-date quick-firing gun — take this weapon of death and destruction, pay no heed to the mawkish snivelers who are afraid of war; too much still remains in the world that must be destroyed with fire and sword for the emancipation of the working class; if anger and desperation grow among the masses, if a revolutionary situation arises, prepare to create new organizations and use these useful weapons of death and destruction against your *own* government and your own bourgeoisie.

That is not easy, to be sure. It will demand arduous preparatory activities and heavy sacrifices. This is a *new* form of organisation and struggle that also *has to be learnt*, and knowledge is not acquired without errors and

setbacks. This form of the class struggle stands in the same relation to participation in elections as an assault against a fortress stands in relation to manoeuvring, marches, or lying in the trenches. It *is not so often* that history places this form of struggle on the order of the day, but then its significance is felt for decades to come. *Days* on which such method of struggle can and must be employed are equal to *scores of years* of other historical epochs". (LCW, 21:253-254, 2nd Ed.)

Another slogan, which leads to real struggle for peace is the *fraternization* slogan. Lenin wrote already in 1915 as follows:

"If such cases of fraternization have proved possible even when opportunism reigns supreme in the top ranks of the Social-Democratic parties of Western Europe, and when social-chauvinism has the support of the entire Social-Democratic press and all the authorities of the Second International, then that shows us how possible it would be to shorten the present criminal, reactionary and slave-holders' war and to organize a revolutionary international movement, if systematic work were conducted in this direction, at least by the Leftwing socialists in all the belligerent countries". (LCW, 21:314, 2nd Ed.)

This slogan Bolshevism regarded as the backbone of its agitation after the February revolution when the

armies of the German and Austrian Empires were fighting against armies or revolutionary Russia.

Lenin ascribed enormous importance to anti-war mass action. He regarded it as a powerful means of influencing the masse. The organisation of a May Day demonstration in 1916 by Karl Liebknecht was regarded by Lenin as an event of enormous significance, as such action influences millions of people.

By indicating illegal organizations, fraternization, and mass action as the fundamental means of preparation for civil war. Lenin at the same time considered necessary the utilization of all legal possibilities for anti-military agitation. Thus, for instance, in analyzing the position of the Bolshevik Duma fraction in the court Lenin said that they:

“The comrades should have refused to give evidence concerning the illegal organisation, and, in view of the historic importance of the moment, they should have taken advantage of a public trial to openly set forth the Social-Democratic views, which are hostile, not only to tsarism in general, but also to social-chauvinism of all and every shade”. (LCW, 21:172, 2nd Ed.)

Lenin particularly pointed out the fact that the Duma deputies utilised their Habeas Corpus rights for mass agitation.

“At a time when nearly all ‘socialist’ (forgive the debasement of the word!) deputies in Europe have proved chauvinists and servants of

chauvinists, when the famous ‘Europeanism’ that once charmed our liberals and liquidators has proved an obtuse habitude of slavish legality, there was to be found in Russia a workers’ party whose deputies excelled, not in high-flown speech, or being ‘received’ in bourgeois, intellectualist salons, or in the business acumen of the ‘European’ lawyer and parliamentarian, but in ties with the working masses, in dedicated work among those masses, in carrying on modest, unpretentious, arduous, thankless and highly dangerous duties of illegal propagandists and organizers. To climb higher, towards the rank of a deputy or minister influential in ‘society’ such has been the actual meaning of ‘European’ (i.e., servile) ‘socialist’ parliamentarism. To go into the midst of the masses, to help enlighten and unite the exploited and the oppressed—such is the slogan advanced by the examples set by Muranov and Petrovsky”. (LCW, 21:173, 2nd Ed.)

Such are the fundamental features of the Bolshevik teachings on war elaborated in 1914–1918. In its struggle against pending wars international Communism will have to utilize in every possible way the Bolshevik experiences of 1914–1918.

