International Journal of
Political Science & Diplomacy

Review Article Open Access

The Great War and the Labor Movement: Reflections on the 100th Anniversary of World War I

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Publication History:
Received: December 05, 2014
Accepted: March 19, 2015
Published: March 21, 2015

Keywords:
Labor movement, World war, Social democracy

Dates can be misleading. The twentieth century did not begin in 1900 but rather with the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand I of Austria-Hungary and his wife on 28June1914. This act by a Serbian nationalist set off a chain reaction of mobilizations that produced World War I. The First World War fundamentally altered the map of Europe and ushered in the twentieth century. Begun without ideals, or even coherent ideas, the "great war" uprooted a generation and ultimately gave rise to a strange mixture of unbridled despair and apocalyptic hope. Often identified with realist strategy, it was actually unclear what the conflict was originally intended to achieve [1, 2]. By 1918, however, 37 million were dead or maimed, four empires crumbled, and-just as Karl Marx and many of his discipleship predicted revolution rose like a phoenix from the ashes of crisis bringing both democracy and dictatorship in its wake.

The "great war" of 1914 was the culmination of "great power" imperialist police searching back to the defeat of Napoleon. Its architects were old school foreign diplomats who had trained under legendary figures like Andrassy, Bismarck, Cavour, Disraeli, and Gorchakov. Not one of their apprentices was a figure of the first rank; not one was capable of subordinating concern with particular national interests to a general policy designed to mitigate the tendencies toward war. All the great powers that war was a legitimate instrument of politics and that it was a vehicle for progress insofar as resulted in the survival of the fittest [3]. Spiced by traditional hatreds, a rigid system of alliances determined by men of another era drew their nations to the brink of war and then back again in a grandiose game of "chicken." All of them understood 1914 in terms of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. This 6-month conflict was the last that Europe had experienced. The ensuing long peace was marked by national resentments and an increasingly romantic view of war. Un questioned belief in balance-of-power and raisond'etat dominated the years leading up to World War I. Assuming that each nation threatened the liberty of the others, the great powers openly practiced imperialism and tacitly considered it their right to intervene in the affairs of smaller states; indeed, more than 9 million square miles were added to the colonial possessions of the great European powers during the 40 years leading up to World War I that would shape the contemporary politics of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Saber-rattling by England, France, and Germany occurred as the Algecira scrisis gave way to the dispute in Morocco of 1906, and the Bosnian conflict of 1908–09 surrendered the front pages first to the 1911 Tripoli War between Italy and Turkey, and then to the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. In the process, most came to believe that an all-encompassing war was inevitable [4,5].

Fears of class conflict at home also exacerbated the sense of a nation at risk abroad. The ruling classes in France witnessed with dismay the conflicts engendered by the seemingly unending Dreyfus affair along with a new wave of syndicalist activism from 1906 to1910. In Russia, the aristocracy was panicked by the eruption of revolutionary will during the mass strike of 1905 that Trotsky later called the "dress rehearsal" for 1917. Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Italy also experienced the astounding growth of the socialist movement and there was a wave of strike actions throughout much of Europein to war. Admittedly, social-democratic attitudes had changed since 1912 when pacifist and internationalist demonstrations were carried out to avert turning the Balkan Wars into an even more severe conflagration. In1914, however, the social-democratic parties of the "great powers" were essentially presented with a fait accompli.

International social democracy was aware of the old arguments made by syndicalists like Gustave Herve and the Dutch radical Domela Nieuwenhu is that there was no difference between "aggressive" and "defensive" wars and that, in the event of conflict, it was incumbent upon the International to demand a general strike. But whether from cowardice at the thought of the violent conflict which such a strike would necessarily produce, a legitimate refusal to bind the proletariat to a fixed tactic under unforeseen conditions, or a realistic assessment of unfavorable political conditions, the vast majority vociferously maintained that such an explicit statement would ultimately prove suicidal. To be sure, the theorists in the Second International were correct in claiming that the right of a nation to defend itself against outside aggression was not inimically opposed to the internationalism of Marx and Engels. Nevertheless, the leadership simply assumed that the real national interests of workers were in conformity with the abstract internationalism represented by the Second International. Some socialists did see the war as a chance to avenge old wrongs, capture still disputed territories, or further imperialist ambitions. But social democracy did not set the international or the domestic stage on which the terrible drama would unfold. Nowhere did socialists exert an influence on foreign policy. Even the Reichstag, it is worth noting, had no knowledge about the diplomatic negotiations taking place between the European Great Powers following the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Leaders of the various parties basically knew little more than what they read in the already censored newspapers. As secret military strategies like the von Schlieffen Plan were being formulated behind the scenes, an intense chauvinist propaganda a campaign began with rumors that the enemy had mobilized. Perhaps more than any other event, in fact, the outbreak of the First World War speaks directly to the dangers of secret diplomacy-which both Kant and Marx warned against-as well as to the need for a democratically accountable foreign policy.

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Citation: Bronner SE (2015) The Great War and the Labor Movement: Reflections on the 100th Anniversary of World War I. Int J Polit Sci Diplom 1: 103. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15344/ijpsd/2015/103

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Too weak to carry through a revolution, without any serious influence on the formation of policy, the labor parties of Europe were left immobilized in the realm of foreign affairs [13]. Choices came down to calling for a European-wide general strike or concluding a "truce" with the ruling elites. But given the enormous imbalance of power between the forces of state repression and a working class, which was a political minority everywhere, a mass strike would have been more than risky. The international proletariat celebrated the outbreak of war; it seemed willing to bear the costs of a "short war" and might well have rejected its own party were a pacifist course taken. Trotsky himself admitted that no existing social-democratic party could have successfully contested its government in revolutionary terms [14]. In fact, even among its most radical elements, there was virtually no support what so ever for Lenin's call to turn the international war between states into an international class war. Thus, social democracy concluded a "truce" with the ruling classes.

"In word and deed," it meant surrendering the party's revolutionary class stand point and accepting are for mist course. Reformers and revisionists argued that a "civil truce" would finally turn the labor movement in to a "partner" with a meaningful share in the nation's destiny. Because actions at the base would necessarily become subordinated to instrumental decision making, many in the socialist leadership also assumed that they would gain new political importance and that, as a consequence, the working class would derive tangible profits. Since the truce also insisted that socialist democracy discipline its radical elements, many on the Right believed that the chance to finally purge the Left had no warrived. It was also not unreasonable to expect a certain input regarding the measures to be taken at home and abroad. Thus, particularly in Germany, many imagined that a softening of the military's political influence as well as a next tension of democracy might take place with the entry of socialists into the decision-making process.

Prospects for a "class truce" rested on a kind of reformist dogma that somehow ideologically insisted that no other course was possible. Though none of these expectations were actually fulfilled, a serious self-criticism from within there for mist ranks never emerged. Even in France, as the power of Clemen ceaugrew, socialists were essentially left to keep the workers in line and help rationalize the bureaucracy, while, in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg was correct in predicting that the actions of the SPD would ultimately lead to the sacrifice of many progressive gains made in the past. Similarly, in Austria and Russia, the new socialist "partners" in the destiny of their nations found themselves creaking under ever cruder and more blatant form so fauth oritarian rule. Censorship and a constriction of civil liberties took place everywhere. The ability to render an effective critical response to events was thereby precluded. The civil truces ever inter nationalities between socialist parties. The die was cast. And so, the SPD could offer little in the way of protest once it became apparent, with Germany's invasion of Belgium, that the war was neither defensive nor devoid of annexationist aims.

Everywhere, it seemed, the social democrats had boxed themselves into a corner. Social democracy was forced to police its ranks and, in turn, this produced a disastrous split between the majority and the militant minority. It also became ever clearer that whether a nation "won" or "lost" didn't matter. If the civil truce forced social democracy to share blame for the terrible costs incurred by the war, it never received any credit from reactionaries for supporting the "national interest." There is ultimately little to justify the course that was taken. In refusing to oppose imperialism and stand up for internationalist principles, the SPD simply abdicated its responsibilities. With its decision, indeed, other socialist parties found themselves facing a "prisoner's dilemma" and a set of circumstances in which they had little choice other than also support their respective nation-states. This becomes particularly clear with respect to the Belgian socialists. Faced with the brutal invasion of their neutral country by Germany, they felt little moral compunction in abdicating their former pacifism and participating in a defense of the nation. With the invasion of Belgium, the initial ethical dilemmas of French and German social democrats faded. The real issue now became how social democracy would continue to justify what was gradually turning into a wholesale slaughter in which, whatever side won, the international proletariat would pay the price.

Already by 1915–16 the international working class, exhausted and decimated, needed peace. But its political parties were hamstrung. Surrendering their political independence and class perspective prevented any of them from making contact with the "enemy" in order to terminate the war. Rumblings of dissent could be heard. Clara Zetk in the well known socialist feminist organized the first antiwar conference in the form of an underground international women's peace gathering on 26–28May 1915 on the heels of an international youth conference in Bern that took place during the first week of April. They were followed by the more famous attempt store constitute a spirit of international solidarity at the famous conferences that took place at Zimmer wald and Kienthal. These were not simply historical failures. They were instead noble attempts to end the conflict and reassert class interests in the face of enormous constraints. Organized by small groups of disaffected intellectual sand radicals, along with socialists from neutral nations like Switzerland and Sweden, these conferences in spired radicals concerned with establishing an international labor purged of chauvinist elements.

All that remained after 1918 were the lingering and ill-founded hopes of radicals like Rosa Luxemburg and Friedrich Adler regarding the emergence of a reinvigorated Second International-perhaps under the guise of the short-lived Vienna International (also known as the 21/2 International)-purged of chauvinist elements. It was really only Lenin who saw that 1914 irrevocably doomed the Second International and in the face of new developments among the great powers drew the consequence that a new form of international organization had become necessary. President Wood row Wilson's fourteen-point peace plan, with its hope for a new League of Nations, was stymied both at home and by France and England whose leaders were intent on reaping the benefits of victory and forcing Germany to shoulder what Keynes called a "Cathaginian peace [15]." Revenge, lust for gain, and the desire to intervene in the civil war wracking the new Soviet Union became the pillars on which the immediate post war politics of the victorious allies came to rest. Socialist leaders mostly opposed the humiliating Treaty of Versailles, which cost Germany its colonies and burdened her with an enormous debt, as well as the treaties of St. Germain and Sèvres that broke up the Austrian and Ottoman Empires. Blum and others maintained their earlier opposition to annexations, recognized that chauvinism would emerge among the defeated nations in response to the enforcement of draconian peace treaties, and fore saw the dangers of military involvement in the Russian civil war.

After the war, socialist "partners" were everywhere shunted aside, fragmented, and often turned into pawns of reactionary forces. Faced

with a "mutilated victory," the French movement split and the majority socialists entered the opposition. In England, where proletarian forces were building for the great general strike of 1926, conservative forces were on the rise that would basically dominate governmental politics until the end of World War II. In Hungary, Poland, and Italy authoritarians of the Right like Horthy, Pilsudski, and Mussolini soon put an end to republican aims along with the organizational power of social democracy, while in Germany the worst was yet to come.

For all the disasters that had been fallen social democracy, however, Marxism continued to provide hope and more than a glimmer of predictive validity. Perhaps the "inevitable" victory of the proletariat had not come to pass. But the war made it obvious that the crisis character of capitalism had not been resolved and that the working class was its primary victim. "Orthodox" Marxists had long spoken about the inter connection between imperialism and war. Though a revolution had taken place in Russia, which was not what Marx had predicted, it appeared self-evident that war born of imperialism had caused the collapse of the old monarchies and produced the republics that orthodox Marxists had always desired.

But the First World War shattered the connection between Marxism and its practical embodiment in a single all-embracing movement that defined the universal interests of the working class. Of course, social democracy had been challenged by various forms of Christian unionism and, in some isolated instances, like nineteenth-century Vienna, by anti-Semitic movements with a socialist patina. But, theoretically as well as practically, all this was only of minor consequence. For the most part, the interests of social democracy and the working class were considered identical. As the war progressed, however, this began to change. As the casualties mounted, dissent began to grow.

Where socialist leaderships turned more to the Left, and where class militancy was maintained, splits in the proletarian ranks were held in check- at least for a while. But, in Germany, the majority SPD –under the spiritless guidance of Fried rich Ebert and Gustav Noske-was as intractable in its support of the war as in its later quest for an alliance with the nation's most reactionary for cesto avoid revolutionary action from below. The majority faction virtually ostracized the 20 deputies who, led by Karl Liebknecht and Otto Ruehle, opposed the governmental request for new war creditsin 1915. Their on grip of party discipline was such that ultimately many of the old stalwarts-Eduard Bernstein, Kurt Eisner, Hugo Haase, Rudolf Hilferding, Karl Kautsky, Georg Ledebour, Clara Zetkin, and others-were led to break away and form the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) in 1917 [16].

The decision to split the SPD must have been extraordinarily painful for those men and women who had dedicated their lives to the party. That decision also held a peculiar irony; it was, after all, precisely the desire to uphold discipline and present a united front that had led even the most vocal critics like Lieb knecht to stand with the party in its vote of 1914. Now, a dynamic of fragmentation was set in motion. Quickly enough, the USPD engendered as till more radical splinter, the Spartacus League (Spartakusbund) that would later serve as the nucleus for the German Communist Party (KPD) born in 1918 [17]. Attempting to stand between social imperialists and Bolsheviks, seeking to resurrect the orthodox Marxism of the Second International for a new time, the USPD crumbled under the weight of assorted contradictions. Disgusted with the conservatism of the majority SPD, it was repelled by the revolutionary adventurism of Spartacus; opposed to a victory with annexations, it could not imagine defeat; supportive of workers' councils, it longed for are public. The party was unable to reconcile those contradictions. So, in 1922, the USPD dissolved, with its left wing entering the KPD and its right wing returning to the SPD. Two competing parties, one social democratic and the other communist, were left to claim the inheritance of Marx and Engels.

Alienated and be reft in a continent littered with the dead and disabled, it is easy to assume that most workers lost their commitment to democracy and that their experience in the trenchesled them to join the fascist and communist movements of the post war era. But, in fact, the working class never served as the mass base for any fascist movement and, though militant elements were attracted to the Bolsheviks during the heroic phase of the Russian Revolution, by 1923 the communists had already squandered their revolutionary opportunities. They would never command a majority of the working class anywhere in Europe. The initial popularity the Bolsheviks enjoyed was not due to their authoritarianism [18]. Enemies of war and aristocratic reactionaries, principled supporters of revolutionary politics, the Bolsheviks appeared to have been right all along. The October Revolution was the answer to the roughly 700,000 casualties at the battle of Verdun while the creation of a new disciplined and hierarchically organized Communist International in 1919 was a response to the decentralized and uncoordinated Second International. As the war drew to a close, Lenin, Trotsky, and there were seen as men of principle and revolutionary action who had with stood popular opinion and the derision of social democratic opportunists. Information was also difficult to find and auto pianhalo surrounded the Bolshevi kseizure of power. Lenin's revolutionary slogan-"All power to the Soviets!"-envisioneda form of rule far more democratic and participatory than what was offered by are public. In this way, the Russian Revolution initially became identified with a new and emancipated society erected upon the ashes of the Paris Commune.

Competing Interests

The author declare that he has no competing interests.

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