



An essay by Simone Weil analysing war in its modern form and its relation to the struggle of the working class toward emancipation.

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War is once more a problem on the order of the day. We live in constant expectation of it. The danger is perhaps imaginary, but the fear is real and is itself a factor of importance. The only word for it is "panic", not so much the dread of physical massacre as psychological anxiety before the problems posed by modern warfare.

Nowhere is this anxious bewilderment more marked than in the workingclass movement. Unless we make a serious attempt at analysis, we run the risk, sooner or later, of finding ourselves powerless not only to act but even to understand. The first step is to draw up a balance sheet of the traditional theories that have guided us up to now.

Up to the period following the last war, the revolutionary movement, in its various forms, had nothing in common with pacifism. The revolutionary stand on war and peace has always found its inspiration in the memories of the years 1792-3-4, the cradle of the revolutionary trends of the 19th century. In absolute contradiction with historic reality, the war of 1793 appeared as a victorious outburst, which, by ranging the French people against all foreign tyrants, was going to break with the same blow the domination of the Court and the upper bourgeoisie and hand over the power of the representatives of the laboring masses. From this legendary belief,

perpetuated by the song *Marseillaise*, flows the conception that a revolutionary war, defensive or offensive, is not only a legitimate form but one of the most glorious forms of the struggle of the toiling masses against their oppressors. This idea appeared to be common to all Marxists and almost all revolutionaries up to about fifteen years ago. When it comes to other types of wars however, the socialist tradition offers not one but several contradictory theories, which have never been clearly compared with each other.

In the first half of the 19th century, war seems to have had a certain prestige in the eyes of the revolutionaries. In France, for example, they vigorously rebuked Louis-Philippe for his peace policy. Proudhon wrote an eloquent eulogy of war. The revolutionaries of the period dreamed not only of insurrections but of war waged in order to liberate oppressed peoples. The war of 1870 forced the proletarian organizations—that is to say, the International—to take, for the first time, a definite stand on the question of war. By Marx's pen, the International invited the workers of the two combatant countries to show opposition against any attempt at conquest, but it also advised them to participate resolutely in the defence of their country in opposition to any attacking foreign adversary.

It was in behalf of another idea that Engels, in 1892, evoked the memories of a war of exactly one hundred years before when he called on the German social-democrats to fight with all their might in the case of a war of Germany against allied France and Russia. According to him, the matter was no longer one of defence or attack. It was now a question of preserving, either by an offensive or by defence, the country where the working class movement was most powerful. It was a question of crushing the country that was most reactionary. According to this outlook (and it was also that of Plekhanov, Mehring and others) the stand to be taken in a war could be determined by calculating what result would be most favorable to the international proletariat. Sides were to be taken accordingly.

Diametrically opposed to this position was that taken by the Bolsheviks and the Spartacists: that in all wars—Lenin excepted revolutionary wars and wars of national defense, Rosa Luxemburg excepted revolutionary wars only—each workingclass should will the defeat of its own country and should sabotage the war effort. But these positions, based on the notion that all wars (save the mentioned exceptions) are imperialist in character and may be compared with quarrels of bandits over the division of their booty, also have their difficulties. For they seem to break the unity of action of the international proletariat by engaging the workers of each country to work for the defeat of their own country and favor at the same time the victory of the imperialist enemy, which, on the other hand, the workers in the opponent country must endeavor to prevent.

Liebnecht's famous formula: "The main enemy is at home," clearly brings out the chief difficulty when it assigns to the various national fractions of the world

proletariat a different enemy and thus, at least in appearance, opposes one section of the proletariat against the other.

It is obvious that on the question of war the Marxist tradition presents neither unity nor clarity. One point was common to all the Marxist trends: the explicit refusal to condemn war as such. Marxists—notably Kautsky and Lenin—willingly paraphrased Clausewitz's formula, according to which war merely continues the politics of peace times. War was to be judged not by the violence of its methods but by the objectives pursued through these methods.

The postwar period introduced into workingclass politics not a new idea—for the workingclass organizations, or those so-called, of our time cannot be accused of developing ideas on any subject whatsoever—but rather a new moral atmosphere. Already, in 1918, the Bolsheviks, who were hot for a revolutionary war, had had to resign themselves to making peace, not for doctrinal reasons but under the direct pressure of the common soldiers, who were no more aroused by the “spirit of 1793” when it was invoked by the Bolsheviks than they had been when Kerensky had spun orations around it. Likewise in other countries, so far as agitational slogans went, the war-battered masses forced those parties which called themselves proletarian to speak in purely pacifist terms—which didn't prevent some from toasting the Red Army or others from voting war credits. This new tone of propaganda was, of course, never explicitly defended in terms of theory. Indeed, no one seemed to notice that it *was* new. But the fact is that instead of attacking war because it was imperialist, people began to attack imperialism because it made wars. As a result, the so-called Amsterdam movement, directed in theory against imperialist wars, was obliged, in order to be heard, to present itself as being against war in general. In its propaganda, the pacific inclinations of the U.S.S.R. were emphasized rather than the proletarian character—or that called such—of contemporary Russia. The formulae of the great theoreticians of socialism on the impossibility of condemning war as such were completely forgotten.

The triumph of Hitler in Germany brought to the surface, so to say, the entire inextricable tangle of the old conceptions. Peace appeared less precious now that it permitted the unspeakable horrors under which thousands of workers were groaning in the German concentration camps. The idea expressed by Engels in his 1892 article reappeared. Is not German fascism the principal enemy of the international proletariat just as Tsarist Russia was in those days? This fascism, spreading like a blotch of oil, can only be erased by force. And since the German proletariat is disarmed, it seems that only the might of the remaining democratic countries can clear away the stain.

Moreover, people said, it is not important to stop to decide whether we are dealing here with a war of defense or a “preventive war.” Did not Marx and Engels at one time try to force England to attack Russia? The coming war can no longer be thought of as a struggle between two imperialist combatants. It is a struggle

between two political regimes. And just as was suggested by old Engels in 1892, when he recalled what happened one hundred years before, so it is suggested now: that a war will oblige the State to make serious concessions to the proletariat. Especially since the impending war will necessarily bring a conflict between the State and the capitalist class and, undoubtedly, also advanced measures of socialization. Who knows but the war may automatically carry to power the representatives of the proletariat?

All these considerations are beginning to create in the political circles seeking support among the propertyless a current of opinion that is more or less explicitly in favor of an active participation of the workers in a war against Germany. This current is still relatively weak, but it can easily swell. Others stick to the distinction between aggression and national defence. Still others hold fast to Lenin's conception and others, as yet quite numerous, remain pacifists, for the most part from the force of habit. The confusion is great.

The existence of so much uncertainty and obscurity may be found surprising, and almost shameful, considering that we are dealing here with the most characteristic phenomenon of our time. It would be more surprising, however, if we arrived at anything better in face of the persisting influence of the absolutely legendary and illusory tradition of 1793 and in view of the very defective common method of evaluating each war by its supposed ends rather than by the character of the methods employed. And it would not be preferable to put the blame on the practice of violence in general, as does the pure pacifist. In each epoch war constitutes a clearly determined species of violence, the mechanism of which we must study before we can form any opinion. The materialist method consists above all in the act of examining all social acts in accordance with a procedure that seeks to discover the consequences necessarily implied in the working out of the methods employed instead of taking the avowed ends of the human acts in question at their face value. One cannot solve nor even state a problem relating to war without first taking into account the mechanism of the military struggle, that is, without first analyzing the social relationships implied by war under the given technical, economic and social conditions.

We can speak of war in general only abstractly. Modern war differs absolutely from anything designated by that name under previous regimes. On the one hand, war is only a projection of the other war which bears the name of competition and which has made of production a simple form of struggle for domination. On the other hand, all economic life now moves toward an impending war. In this inextricable mixture of the military and economic, where arms are put at the service of competition and production is put at the service of war, war merely reproduces the social relationships constituting the very structure of the existing order—but to a more acute degree.

Marx has shown forcefully that the modern method of production subordinates the workers to the instruments of labor, which are disposed of by those who do not work. He has shown how competition, knowing no other weapon than the exploitation of the workers, is transformed into a struggle of each employer against his own workmen and, in the last analysis, of the entire class of employers against their employees.

In the same way, war in our days is distinguished by the subordination of the combatants to the instruments of combat, and the armaments, the true heroes of modern warfare, as well as the men dedicated to their service, are directed by those who do not fight. And since this directing apparatus has no other way of fighting the enemy than by sending its own soldiers, under compulsion, to their death—the war of one State against another State resolves itself into a war of the State and the military apparatus against its own army.

*Ultimately, modern war appears as a struggle led by all the State apparatuses and their general staffs against all men old enough to bear arms.* But while the machine used in production takes from the worker only his labor power and while employers have no other weapon of constraint than dismissal—a weapon that is somewhat blunted by the existence of the possibility for the worker to choose among different employers—each soldier is forced to sacrifice his very life to the needs of the total military machine. He is forced to do so under the threat of execution without the benefit of a trial, which the State power holds over his head. In view of this, it makes little difference whether the war is offensive or defensive, imperialist or nationalist. Every State is obliged to employ this method since the enemy also employs it.

*The great error of nearly all studies of war, an error into which all socialists have fallen, has been to consider war as an episode in foreign politics, when it is especially an act of interior politics, and the most atrocious act of all.*

We are not concerned here with sentimental considerations or with a superstitious respect for human life. We are concerned here with a very simple fact, that massacre is the most radical form of oppression and the soldiers do not merely expose themselves to death but are sent to death. And since every apparatus of oppression, once constituted, remains such until it is shattered, every war that places the weight of a military apparatus over the masses, forced to serve it in its manoeuvres, must be considered a factor of reaction, even though it may be led and directed by revolutionists. As for the exterior effect of such a war, that is determined by the political relationships established in the interior. *Arms wielded by the apparatus of the sovereign State cannot bring liberty to anybody.*

That is what Robespierre came to understand and that is what was verified so brilliantly by the war of 1792, the war that gave birth to the notion of revolutionary wars.

At that time, military technique was far from reaching the degree of centralization of our days. Yet, after Frederick II, the subordination of the soldiers, charged with carrying out the war operations, to the high command, charged with coordinating these operations, was quite strict. At the time of the French Revolution, war was going to transform France, as Barrere put it, into a vast camp, and as a result give to the State apparatus the power without appeal usually held by military authority. And such was the calculation made by the Court and the Girondins in 1792. For this war—which a legend so easily accepted by socialists has made appear as a spontaneous outburst of the mass aroused against its oppressors and at the same time against the foreign tyrants menacing the mass—was in fact a provocation on the part of the Court and the upper bourgeoisie, united in a plot against the liberties of the people. They miscalculated, since the war, instead of creating that “National Unity” they hoped for, sharpened all conflicts, brought first the King and then the Girondins to the scaffold, and gave dictatorial power to the Mountain. All the same, on April 20, 1792, the day war was declared, every hope of democracy vanished, never to return; and the second of June was followed only too speedily by the ninth Thermidor, which in turn speedily produced the eighteenth Brumaire. What price power for Robespierre and his friends? Their aim was not simply to seize power, but to establish real democracy, both social and political. By the bloody irony of history, the war forced them to leave on paper the Constitution of 1793, to forge a centralized State apparatus, to conduct a murderous terror which they could not even turn against the rich, to annihilate all liberty—in a word, to smooth the road for the bourgeois, bureaucratic and military despotism of Napoleon.

But the revolutionaries of 1792 at least remained clear-headed. On the eve of his death, Saint-Just wrote this profound sentence: *“Only those who are in battles win them, and only those who are powerful profit from them.”*

As for Robespierre, as soon as he faced the question, he understood that war, powerless to free any foreign people (“one does not bring liberty at the point of the bayonet”), would hand over the French people to the chains of State power, a power that one could not attempt to weaken at the time when it was imperative to struggle against the foreign enemy. “War is good for military officers, for the ambitious, for money-jobbers . . . for the executive power . . . The condition of war settles for the State all other cares; one is quits with the people as soon as one gives it a war.” He foresaw the coming military despotism. He never ceased to point this out despite the apparent successes of the Revolution. He again predicted it in his death speech and left this prediction after him as a testament to which those who have since made use of his name have unfortunately paid no attention.

The history of the Russian revolution furnishes the same data, and with a striking analogy. The Soviet Constitution met the same fate as the Constitution of 1793. Like Robespierre, Lenin abandoned the democratic doctrines he assumed at the time of the revolution to establish the despotism of the apparatus of a centralized State. He was the precursor of Stalin, just as Robespierre was the precursor of

Bonaparte. There is a difference. Lenin, who had prepared this domination of the State apparatus by forging a strongly centralized party, deformed his own doctrines in order to adapt them to the needs of the hour. Moreover, he was not guillotined, but became the idol of a new State religion.

The history of the Russian Revolution is the more striking because war constitutes its central problem. The revolution was made, as a movement against war, by soldiers who, feeling the government and military apparatus go to pieces over them, hastened to shake off an intolerable yoke. Invoking, with an involuntary sincerity due to his ignorance, the memory of 1792, Kerensky appealed to the soldiers to continue the war for exactly the same reasons as were given by the Girondins before. Trotsky has admirably shown how the bourgeoisie, counting on war to postpone the problems of interior politics and to lead back the people under the yoke of State power, wanted to transform “the war till the exhaustion of the enemy into a war for the exhaustion of the Revolution.” The Bolsheviks then called for a struggle against imperialism. But it was war itself and not imperialism that was in question. They saw this well when, once in power, they were obliged to sign the peace of Brest-Litovsk. The old army was then broken up. Lenin repeated with Marx that the dictatorship of the proletariat could tolerate neither a permanent army, police or bureaucracy. But the white armies and the fear of foreign intervention soon put the whole of Russia into a state of siege. The army was then reconstituted, the election of officers suppressed, thirty thousand officers of the old regime reinstated in the cadres, the death penalty, the usual discipline and centralization reestablished. Parallel with this, came the reconstitution of the police, and the bureaucracy. We know what this military, bureaucratic and police apparatus has consequently done to the Russian people.

*Revolutionary War is the grave of revolution. And it will be that as long as the soldiers themselves, or rather the armed citizenry, are not given the means of waging war without a directing apparatus, without police pressure, without courts martial, without punishment for deserters. Once in modern history was a war carried on in this manner—under the Commune. Everybody knows with what results. It seems that revolution engaged in war has only the choice of either succumbing under the murderous blows of counter-revolution or transforming itself into counter-revolution through the very mechanism of the military struggle.*

*The perspectives of a revolution seem therefore quite restricted. For can a revolution avoid war? It is, however, on this feeble chance that we must stake everything or abandon all hope. An advanced country will not encounter, in case of revolution, the difficulties which in backward Russia served as a base for the barbarous regime of Stalin. But a war of any scope will give rise to others as formidable.*

For mighty reasons a war undertaken by a bourgeois State cannot but transform power into despotism and subjection into assassination. If war sometimes appears

as a revolutionary factor, it is only in the sense that it constitutes an incomparable test for the functioning of the State. In contact with war, a badly organized apparatus collapses. But if the war does not end soon, or if it starts up again or if the decomposition of the State has not gone far enough, the situation results in revolutions, which, according to Marx's formula, perfect the State apparatus instead of shattering it. That is what has always happened up to now.

In our time the difficulty developed by war to a high degree is especially that resulting from the ever growing opposition between the State apparatus and the capitalist system. The Briey affair during the last war provides us with a striking example. The last war brought to several State apparatuses a certain authority over economic matters. (This gave rise to the quite erroneous term of "War Socialism.") Later the capitalist system returned to an almost normal manner of functioning, in spite of custom barriers, quotas and national monetary systems. There is no doubt that in the next war things will go a little farther. We know that quantity can transform itself into quality. In this sense, war can constitute a revolutionary factor in our time, but only if one wants to give the term "revolution" the meaning given to it by the Nazis. Like economic depression, a war will arouse hatred against capitalists, and this hatred, exploited for "National Unity", will benefit the State apparatus and not the workers. Furthermore, to realize the kinship of war and fascism, one has but to recall those fascist tracts appealing to "the soldierly spirit" and "front-line socialism". In war as in fascism, the essential "point" is the obliteration of the individual by a State bureaucracy serving a rabid fanaticism. Whatever the demagogues may say, the damage the capitalist system suffers at the hands of either of these phenomena can only still further weaken all human values.

*The absurdity of an anti-fascist struggle which chooses war as its means of action thus appears quite clear. Not only would this mean to fight barbarous oppression by crushing peoples under the weight of even more barbarous massacre. It would actually mean spreading under another form the very regime that we want to suppress. It is childish to suppose that a State apparatus rendered powerful by a victorious war would lighten the oppression exercised over its own people by the enemy State apparatus. It is even more childish to suppose that the victorious State apparatus would permit a proletarian revolution to break out in the defeated country without drowning it immediately in blood. As for bourgeois democracy being annihilated by fascism a war would not do away with this threat but would reinforce and extend the causes that now render it possible.*

*It seems that, generally speaking, history is more and more forcing every political actor to choose between aggravating the oppression exercised by the various State apparatuses and carrying on a merciless struggle against these apparatuses in order to shatter them. Indeed, the almost insoluble difficulties presenting themselves nowadays almost justify the pure and simple abandonment of the struggle. But if we are not to renounce all action, we must understand that we can struggle against the State apparatus only inside the country. And notably in case of*

war, we must choose between hindering the functioning of the military machine of which we are ourselves so many cogs and blindly aiding that machine to continue to crush human lives.

*Thus Karl Liebknecht's famous words: "The main enemy is at home" take on their full significance and are revealed to be applicable to all wars in which soldiers are reduced to the condition of passive matter in the hands of a bureaucratic and military apparatus.* This means that as long as the present war technique continues, these words apply to any war, absolutely speaking. And in our time we can not foresee the advent of another technique. In production as in war, the increasingly collective manner with which forces are operated has not modified the essentially individual functions of decision and management. It has only placed more and more of the hands and lives of the mass at the disposal of the commanding apparatuses.

Until we discover how to avoid in the very act of production or of fighting, the domination of an apparatus over the mass, so long every revolutionary attempt will have in it something of the hopeless. For if we do know what system of production and combat we aspire with all our heart to destroy, we do not know what acceptable system could replace it. Furthermore, every attempt at reform appears puerile in face of the blind necessities implied in the operation of the monstrous social machine. Our society resembles an immense machine that ceaselessly snatches and devours human beings and which no one knows how to master. And they who sacrifice themselves for social progress are like persons who try to catch hold of the wheels and the transmission belts in order to stop the machine and are destroyed in their attempts.

But the impotence one feels today—an impotence we should never consider permanent—does not excuse one from remaining true to one's self, nor does it excuse capitulation to the enemy, whatever mask he may wear. Whether the mask is labelled Fascism, Democracy, or Dictatorship of the Proletariat, our great adversary remains The Apparatus—the bureaucracy, the police, the military. Not the one facing us across the frontier or the battle-lines, which is not so much our enemy as our brothers' enemy, but the one that calls itself our protector and makes us its slaves. No matter what the circumstances, the worst betrayal will always be to subordinate ourselves to this Apparatus, and to trample underfoot, in its service, all human values in ourselves and in others.