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100 years ago: Capitalism's world war and the battle against it

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV475 - August 2014 -

Publication date: Tuesday 12 August 2014

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John Riddell is the author and editor of numerous books, including, most recently, *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*. Here, he explains how the First World War broke out 100 years ago, how the socialist movement reacted, and how a revolutionary antiwar opposition emerged.

One hundred years ago, fighting broke out among the great powers of Europe, launching what has become known as the First World War. The brutal conflict, which lasted more than four years, proved to a decisive turning point for humankind and for its socialist movement, and its effects are strongly felt even today.

The run-up to war began on June 28, 1914, when Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. Four weeks later, Austria-Hungary reacted with an ultimatum to the Serbian government that would have virtually destroyed Serbian independence.

Serbia rejected these demands, and Austria declared war on July 28. Over the next seven days, the great powers of Europe joined the conflict: Russia, France and Great Britain on the Serbian side; Germany in alliance with Austria-Hungary. A German invasion brought Belgium into the war.

The initial shock of battle was inconclusive, and the war settled into a murderous and extremely destructive and stalemate. The list of belligerents grew, including Ottoman Turkey on the German side (called the Central Powers); Italy with the British and French (the "Entente").

Both sides imposed naval blockades, the Germans utilizing submarines. Both utilized aviation, newly invented, as a weapon of war. Fighting spread to overseas colonies, with Japan seizing several German possessions in the Far East.

The United States entered the war in 1917, giving the Entente a marked material superiority.

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For the peoples in Europe's warring countries, the conflict brought untold suffering and death. As the war progressed, working people responded with strikes, protests, mutinies and uprisings. The 1917 revolution in Russia took the country out of the war in March of the following year.

Starting in August 1918, the Entente armies began a sustained advance on all fronts. A tide of revolution swept the Central Powers; the uprising of German workers and soldiers brought the war to an abrupt end on November 11, 1918.

An estimated 10 million armed personnel were killed, along with 7 million civilians. Production in the warring countries fell by about a third, afflicting millions of workers with hunger and destitution. Nor did the guns fall silent in 1918: armed attacks continued against the Russian Soviet republic; rebellious workers in Germany, Hungary and other countries; and insurgent colonial peoples.

At the war's end, a workers' and peasants' republic had been established in Russia, which thus broke free from world

imperialism. Meanwhile, the victorious powers seized many pieces of land in Europe and the colonies. Several new capitalist states were set up in Eastern Europe.

The victors formed a continuing alliance, the League of Nations, supposedly to keep the peace, but imperialist rivalries continued as before, and within 20 years, Europe and the world were plunged into an even more destructive conflict.

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The socialist movement before 1914, which enjoyed mass support across all Europe, foresaw the oncoming conflict and joined in an effort to head off the war threat.

A conference of the Socialist International in 1907 pledged to "exert every effort to prevent [war's] outbreak." If war broke out regardless, socialists would "intervene for its speedy termination" and "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."

The quoted passage was proposed by Rosa Luxemburg, a leader of the International's left wing. Although cautiously worded, it contained an unmistakable commitment to respond to war by efforts toward a workers' revolution. The pledge was repeated by the International's congresses in 1910 and 1912, and many strong antiwar actions took place, including in 1914.

When war arrived in August 1914, the rulers in each country utilized their control of newspapers and dominant social institutions to impose their interpretation of the war as purely an act of self-defense. Some in the socialist ranks were influenced by this barrage. Socialist movements faced a threat: Resistance to the war would drive them into illegality, sacrificing their impressive administrative and publishing apparatus, and subjecting them to severe repression.

Party leaderships in Britain, France, Belgium and Germany crumpled before this prospect. On August 4, 1914, the parliamentary representatives of the International's strongest component, the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD), voted unanimously to finance the German war effort, a blatant repudiation of socialist principle. British, French and Belgian leaders did likewise, and the Socialist International collapsed. Only in Russia and Serbia did Socialists stand by their pledge to oppose the war.

Lenin, the central leader of the Bolshevik wing of Russian socialism, was then living across the border in Austria-Hungary.

The local authorities arrested him on August 8. Austrian socialists secured his release, and he made his way to neutral Switzerland, arriving in Bern on September 5. During the next three days, he met in conference with other Bolshevik leaders. They adopted the first major statement on the war by its socialist opponents.

The war was "bourgeois, imperialist, and dynastic" in character, the Bolsheviks stated, continuing:

"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."

The Bolsheviks declared that support of the war by major socialist parties signified "the ideological and political bankruptcy of the [Socialist] International." Neither of the warring blocs was in any way superior to the other, they said.

Soldiers and workers needed to "use weapons, not against their brothers, the wage slaves in other countries, but against the reactionary and bourgeois governments of all countries," the Bolsheviks stated. They stood for "a revolution in Russia" and "liberation of and self-determination for nationalities oppressed by Russia."

The statement faithfully applied the International's prewar stand and also accurately predicted the course actually taken by Russian workers and soldiers in the 1917 revolution.

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During the six months that followed, the revolutionary wing of German socialism raised its banner, setting in motion the organization of antiwar socialists internationally.

In early August 1914, in response to the SPD's approval of war spending, a few left-wing opponents of that decision met in Rosa Luxemburg's apartment and decided to send 300 telegrams to left-wing party officials, inviting them to discuss a collective response to the August 4 betrayal. Only one clearly positive answer was received, from Clara Zetkin.

However, opposition stirred in some local SPD organizations. For example, a meeting of SPD leaders in Stuttgart, where Zetkin was based, condemned the war credits vote by 81 to three.

On September 21, Karl Liebknecht, a parliamentary deputy and prewar leader of the SPD's antiwar campaign, met in Stuttgart with a group of prominent party leaders there. They berated him for his failure to break party discipline and vote against war spending on August 4. "You are quite right in criticizing me," Liebknecht responded. "Even if alone, I should have called out my 'no.'"

In November, Luxemburg's local party branch sent out an underground message calling for underground work and a new party. "Had the Social Democratic fraction done its duty on August 4," the circular stated, "the external form of the organization would probably have been destroyed, but the spirit would have remained...."

On December 2, the minority view in the SPD broke through the censorship with a dramatic action. Liebknecht voted in parliament against war spending, "in protest against the war; against those who launched it and those who direct it; against the capitalist policies that brought it about; against the capitalist objectives for which it is waged...." Liebknecht's bold stand resounded across Europe.

On March 26–28, 1915, Zetkin convened the first wartime international Socialist conference in Bern: a conference of the Socialist Women's Movement with 29 delegates from seven countries. "Only the united determination of the people can stop the slaughter," the conference declared. "Down with capitalism.... Down with the war! Onward to socialism!"

The following month, delegates representing socialist youth leagues in nine countries, with tens of thousands of members, held a similar conference in Bern.

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In September 1915, 42 delegates from 11 countries gathered nearby, in Zimmerwald, Switzerland. A left wing in the conference, led by the Bolsheviks, stressed the need for a clean break with pro-war socialists and a struggle to overthrow capitalism; other forces emphasized the need to struggle for peace.

All currents at the conference, however, united in calling on workers to fight for peace, without annexations or indemnities. The struggle for peace is also a struggle for freedom, reconciliation of peoples and socialism, the conference stated.

The Zimmerwald manifesto, drafted mostly by Leon Trotsky, circulated illegally in the warring countries and became a banner for revolutionary workers. The war lasted for three more horrific years. By its end, the slogans of Zimmerwald were being voiced up by millions of workers and soldiers across Europe. In 1917 and 1918, they carried out revolutions in Russia, Germany, and several neighboring countries.

The manifesto reads, in part:

"The war has lasted more than a year. Millions of corpses cover the battlefields....The most savage barbarism is today celebrating its triumph over all that hitherto constituted the price of humanity....

[T]he war that has produced this chaos is the product of imperialism, of the attempt on the part of the capitalist classes of every nation to feed their greed for profit by the exploitation of human labor and of the natural resources of the entire globe....

[We] call upon the working class to come to its senses and to fight for peace. This struggle is the struggle for freedom, for the reconciliation of peoples, for socialism....

Proletarians!...[Y]ou must stand up for your own cause, for the sacred aims of socialism, for the emancipation of the oppressed nations as well as of the enslaved classes...No sacrifice is too great, no burden too heavy in order to achieve this goal: peace among the peoples....

Beyond all borders, beyond the reeking battlefields, beyond the devastated cities and villages: Proletarians of all countries, unite."

A century after the First World War, the spirit of Zimmerwald still resounds in our global struggle against war and oppression.

28 July 2014

[Socialist Worker](#).

(Quotations in this article are from Lenin's *Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, a documentary collection edited by John Riddell (available from Pathfinder Press). See also *War on War*, an account of the Zimmerwald movement by R. Craig Nation, available from Haymarket Books.)

[1] <http://www.haymarketbooks.org/pb/To...>