

Nick Beams delivers lecture in Sydney and Melbourne

World War Two: Lessons and Warnings

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The following is the text of a lecture delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to audiences in Sydney and Melbourne in November, 2009.

The 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II has been met with a strange, and, one might add, almost eerie silence in view of the catastrophe that was unleashed. This was the bloodiest event of the twentieth century. It resulted in the deaths of more than 70 million people, including almost 27 million in the Soviet Union and up to 20 million in China. The war saw unspeakable horrors: the mass murder of almost 6 million European Jews, the fire-bombing of Hamburg, Dresden and Tokyo and the dropping of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to name but a few.

Our task today is to draw the lessons of the war and establish their significance for the present day. Is World War II some distant historical event, consigned to memory, revisited occasionally. Or does it have contemporary relevance?

To draw the lessons of the war, we need to understand its causes. And here some preliminary work has to be done. We have to cut through the thick overgrowth of myths and legends that surround the war—myths that are continually fed and recreated in order to serve contemporary political agendas.

According to the prevailing legends, the war in Europe began when Britain, after trying to appease Nazi Germany, finally realized with the invasion of Poland in September 1939, that a stand had to be taken. From then on, the war was a struggle of democracy against fascist aggression. Great Britain, standing alone after the defeat of France in May 1940, and until the entry of the US in December 1941, confronted the menace of Nazism, as the war-time prime minister Winston Churchill rallied the small island nation in its “finest hour”.

The fact that when the war began, Great Britain stood at the head of the largest empire the world has ever seen, encompassing a quarter of the earth’s surface, is conveniently left out of this story. The myth is further embellished regarding the role of Churchill. With the failure of the policy of appeasement, we are led to believe, Churchill, an ardent defender of democracy and opponent of Nazism and fascism, was called to office from the political wilderness to take charge of Britain in her hour of need.

Like all historical legends this one is sustained because it serves contemporary political objectives. Look how often it has been wheeled out in the past 20 years. The Gulf War was launched in 1990 to prevent the

Hitler of the Middle East, the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, from gobbling up little Kuwait ... remember the appeasement of Hitler at Munich in 1938! Then the war against Serbia was launched in 1999 to prevent the Hitler of the Balkans, the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, from carrying out genocide against the Kossovars ... remember 1938! And the Middle East Hitler made a return in 2003 as the US launched its war against Iraq.

What was the real situation in the 1930s? The appeasement policy was not the result of some failure to stand up to the dictator Hitler, but involved a very definite set of calculations. British accommodation to the Nazi regime was based on the hope that Hitler would carry out the program outlined in his book *Mein Kampf* and launch a war against the Soviet Union, from which British imperialism would be able to benefit. Britain had pursued the overthrow of the Soviet regime from the day after the revolution of October 1917. There was no more passionate supporter of this goal than Churchill, who advocated military intervention by the imperialist powers to “strangle the Bolshevik infant in its cradle.”

When Hitler was a still unknown right-wing fanatic thumping the tables in the beer halls of Munich, Churchill, a government minister, was denouncing the Russian Revolution in terms that the Nazi regime would later employ.

In an article published in 1920 on the insidious role of what he termed the “international Jews,” Churchill wrote: “The adherents of this sinister confederacy are mostly men reared up among the unhappy populations of countries where Jews are persecuted on account of their race. Most, if not all, of them have forsaken the faith of their forefathers, and divorced from their minds all spiritual hopes of the next world. This movement among the Jews is not new. From the days of Spartacus-Weishaupt to those of Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxemburg (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing. It played ... a definitely recognizable part in the tragedy of the French Revolution. It has been the mainspring of every subversive movement during the Nineteenth Century; and now at last this band of extraordinary personalities from the underworld of the great cities of Europe and America have gripped the Russian people by the hair of their heads and have become practically the undisputed masters of that enormous empire.” [1] Long before Hitler’s rantings against the Jew-Bolshevik conspiracy filled the air waves and newspaper pages, Churchill had advanced it—not accidentally, in the same year that the most infamous anti-Semitic tract, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was launched.

Churchill’s attitude to fascism was nowhere more clearly summed up

than in a speech he delivered on January 20, 1927, during a visit to Italy, where the fascist regime of Mussolini had come to power in 1922. "I could not help being charmed," he declared, "like so many other people who have been, by Signor Mussolini's gentle and simple bearing and by his calm, detached poise in spite of so many burdens and dangers. Secondly, anyone could see that he thought of nothing but the lasting good of the Italian people ... If I had been an Italian I am sure that I should have been whole-heartedly with you from the start to finish in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetite and passions of Leninism. I will, however, say a word on an international aspect of fascism. Externally your movement has rendered a service to the whole world. The great fear which has always beset every democratic leader or a working-class leader has been that of being undermined or overbid by something more extreme than he. Italy has shown that there is a way of fighting the subversive forces which can rally the masses of the people, properly led, to value and wish to defend the honour and stability of civilized society. She has provided the necessary antidote to the Russian poison. Hereafter no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means of protection against the cancerous growth of Bolshevism." [2]

In Germany, Hitler, then beginning his rise to power, was also a great admirer of Mussolini as the savior of civilization against Bolshevism. So much for the legend that the war was launched in defence of democracy to prevent the growth of fascism. The Nazis only became an enemy when it was feared that their drive for conquest threatened the position of British imperialism.

When we come to the entry of the United States into the war, following the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese air force on December 7, 1941—a date, President Roosevelt declared, "which will live in infamy"—we encounter another legend. In this case, we are told, the United States did not enter the war to pursue any imperial ambitions or to secure its geopolitical interests. It was, to use Roosevelt's words again, simply responding to an "unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan". Nothing could be further from the truth. The war against Japan was awaited and anticipated. It had only become a matter of time as to when it would begin after the United States imposed an oil embargo against Japan in July 1941, to enforce its demand that Japan withdraw from China. Ever since its emergence as a major world power in 1898, the United States had insisted on an "open door" policy in China. It was hostile to the Japanese incursions, first the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and then the second war launched in July 1937 with the capture of Beijing.

Plans for a war against Japan were under active consideration in the US long before Pearl Harbour. In March 1939, the US Navy distributed a revision to its war plan called Basic War Plan ORANGE. Orange stood for Japan. According to the plan, war with ORANGE would be "precipitated without notice" and would be an offensive war of "long duration". The aim of the war plan was "to impose the will of the United States upon ORANGE by destroying ORANGE Armed Forces and by disrupting ORANGE economic life, while protecting American interests at home and abroad." [3]

In September 1940, the American naval attaché in Tokyo sent a report to Washington about the state of Japanese cities. "Hoses are old, worn and leaky," he wrote, "water mains are shut off at night. Little pressure is available. Fire hydrants are few and far between. ... Incendiary bombs sowed widely over an area of Japanese cities would result in the destruction of major portions of those cities." [4] This advice was put into deadly effect in March 1945 with the firebombing of Tokyo. More than 100,000 people are estimated to have died in the ensuing firestorm; more than the immediate deaths resulting from the atomic bombing of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An official US Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that "probably more persons lost their lives by fire at Tokyo in a 6-hour period than at any time in the history of man." [5]

Having cut a path through the myths and legends, let us turn now to the underlying causes of World War II. They can only be revealed on the basis of an historical analysis that goes well beyond the immediate events and conflicts of the late 1930s. Those conflicts and the circumstances in which they arose have themselves to be explained.

Any consideration of the causes of World War II must start from the fact that it erupted just 21 years after the conclusion of World War I. That is, about the same period of time from the present day to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern European regimes and the Soviet Union.

The eruption of the war on August 4, 1914 came as a tremendous shock. Very few people suspected that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, six weeks earlier on June 28, 1914, would set in motion a chain of events that would plunge the continent of Europe into four years of conflict, producing death and destruction on a previously inconceivable scale.

There were, however, extremely perceptive observers who had anticipated what a general European war would look like. At the end of 1887, Frederick Engels wrote: "And, finally, the only war left for Prussia-Germany to wage will be a world war, a world war, moreover, of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined. Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other's throats and in the process they will strip Europe barer than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent; famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism, both of the armies and the people, in the wake of acute misery; irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in universal bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their conventional political wisdom to the point where crowns will roll into the gutters by the dozen and no one will be around to pick them up; the absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will emerge as victor from the battle. Only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class. That is the prospect for the moment when the systematic development of mutual one-upmanship in armaments reaches its climax and finally brings forth its inevitable fruits."

Engels was pointing to the consequences of a war among the bourgeois nation-states whose economies, and therefore military capacities, had rapidly expanded in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Capitalist finance and industry was developing on an immense scale. This was the beginning of the age of imperialism, with the capitalist great powers now engaged in an increasingly intense struggle, on a global scale, for markets, colonies, spheres of influence and raw materials. More and more this economic shift was coming into conflict with the prevailing geopolitical relations.

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 there had been no general conflict between the European powers—a kind of Pax Britannica existed. But by the end of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was losing its position of overall dominance. Previously, its conflicts on the European continent had been with France. Now it was being challenged by a new and more dynamic power, Germany. In the East, Japan was on the rise and in the West an even more powerful economic power was emerging, in the form

of the United States, where industrial development had gone ahead by leaps and bounds in the decades following the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865.

The Marxist movement had analyzed the implications of this new situation and the Second International, founded in 1889, had carried a series of resolutions in the first decade of the twentieth century, pointing to the emerging danger of war. These resolutions insisted that the socialist movement had to oppose the drive to war and, if it could not be prevented, to use the crisis created by the outbreak of war to overthrow the capitalist system. However, when war erupted on August 4, 1914, virtually the entire leadership of the old socialist parties capitulated and supported their own bourgeoisie. Only a handful of socialist leaders, principally among them Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, maintained their opposition to the war.

Following this betrayal of international socialism, the revolutionary Marxists confronted two interconnected political tasks: to explain what had given rise to the war; the causes and implications of the collapse of the Second International and, on the basis of this analysis, to advance a revolutionary perspective for the working class.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

In 1915 Trotsky outlined the essential causes of the war in his brilliant pamphlet *War and the International*. Rejecting the explanations offered by the imperialist politicians and exposing their underlying deceit, he demonstrated that the eruption of war was rooted in the organic and irresolvable contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

“The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means a collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit.... The war proclaims the downfall of the national state. Yet at the same time it proclaims the downfall of the capitalist system of economy. By means of the national state, capitalism has revolutionized the whole economic system of the world. It has divided the whole earth among the oligarchies of the great powers, around which were grouped the satellites, the small nations, who lived off the rivalry between the great ones. The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions but also against the capitalist economic organizations, which has now turned into barbarous disorganization and chaos.”

From this analysis there flowed very definite political conclusions that formed the basis of the program for which the international working class now had to fight: “The only way in which the proletariat can meet the imperialistic perplexity of capitalism is by opposing to it as a practical program of the day the socialist organization of world economy. War is the method by which capitalism, at the climax of its development, seeks to solve its insoluble contradictions. To this method the proletariat must oppose its own method, the method of the social revolution.”

The collapse of the Second International made clear the essential significance of the protracted struggle waged by Lenin against opportunism, in the course of the building of the Bolshevik Party in Russia. Opportunism, based on an adaptation to the bourgeoisie and the

national state, was not a trend within the socialist movement with which it was possible to somehow peacefully co-exist. The political preparation of the working class took place through an unrelenting struggle against these tendencies, which represented the deepest needs and interests of the capitalist class itself.

Lenin’s perspective was to turn the imperialist war into a civil war. This did not mean that the working class could immediately launch an insurrection and the struggle for power, regardless of objective conditions, but that it had to proceed on this line of march. The war had demonstrated that the socialist revolution was not, as the dominant trends within the Second International had conceived, some kind of distant event, but that it had to be actively prepared in the daily struggle of the party. Lenin opposed, above all, the theories of Karl Kautsky, the theoretical leader of the German Social Democratic Party, who maintained that the war was not an inevitable outcome of capitalism, and that it was therefore possible that the major capitalist powers could somehow come to an agreement to peacefully divide up the world and establish peace.

In an analysis that has the most striking contemporary relevance, Lenin refuted these assertions, insisting that no alliance between the capitalist powers could be permanent, because they developed at an uneven rate. Half a century before, Germany had been a “miserable, insignificant country” in terms of her capitalist strength compared to Britain. Now Germany was challenging the old empire. Any “peace” established in the future would likewise inevitably be disrupted. No imperialist alliance or coalition could be permanent, but was, inevitably, nothing more than a truce in the period between wars. Peace arose out of wars, and periods of peace prepared the ground for new wars. Only the socialist revolution and the overthrow of the capitalist system itself could end war and the threat that it posed to human civilization.

The Versailles Treaty and its outcome

On the basis of Lenin’s approach, let us examine how the “peace” established after World War I inevitably led to the eruption of World War II.

The war had come to an abrupt end in November 1918 after the defeat of the German summer offensive. The German High Command took the decision to seek peace through the American president Woodrow Wilson, who had led the US into the war in April 1917. By 1918 a vital new factor had entered the political situation—the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the rising tide of revolution across Europe. Uppermost in the calculations of all the European bourgeois leaders was the fear that if they did not end the war, it would be brought to a conclusion through socialist revolution.

The Versailles peace conference of 1919, and the Treaty that resulted, resolved none of the conflicts that had given rise to the war. In fact it exacerbated them. National antagonisms and conflicts remained and instead of a rational organization of the European economy, economic conflicts among the major powers were intensified. Plunder by war was replaced by a new system of robbery. France insisted that Germany pay crippling reparations payments with the aim of trying to prevent its economic resurgence. Britain was owed money by Italy and France. But Britain, in turn, owed money to the United States, which insisted that it be repaid. Money was extracted from Germany, in the form of reparations,

which were then used to pay France and Britain, which in turn repaid debts to the United States. The United States, in turn, after 1924, issued billions of dollars of loans to maintain German economic stability, so that Germany could continue to pay reparations and keep the circuit of finance going. In the words of British economist John Maynard Keynes, the world had been turned into an economic madhouse.

(Before anyone starts laughing, I might point out that in the wake of the crisis of 2007-2008, the global financial system is being sustained by methods that are no less insane. In the US, the Fed, the central bank, issues money to the banks at virtually zero interest. The banks use this money to trade in the bond and debt markets, often to organize the financing of government debt that has been incurred to fund the bailout of the banks and financial institutions. As a result, the banks are able to report increased profits and pay out lavish bonuses.)

Ten years after the Treaty of Versailles, in conditions where the major European economies had only within the previous two years regained the level of economic output they had attained in 1913, the last year of peace, this economic house of cards collapsed and the world economy was sent plunging into the Great Depression. The ensuing economic tensions between the capitalist great powers fueled the drive to war.

Each of the major antagonists in the war that was to erupt in 1939 had powerful interests to defend and advance—interests that led inevitably to conflict with each other. Let us consider each of them in turn.

For Germany, the collapse of the world economy meant that military conquest had to be placed back on the agenda. This was articulated in the program of Hitler and the Nazi party in the doctrine of *Lebensraum* (living space). Hitler considered it futile to try to advance Germany's interests through competition with the British Empire on the world market. Preferring to reach an agreement with Britain, Hitler was far more concerned with the United States. There was an ongoing campaign in Germany for the restoration of its pre-war borders—Germany had lost a considerable area as a result of the Treaty of Versailles. But for Hitler that was insufficient. Even if those regions were returned, the German economy was too small to compete with the United States, whose growing economic preeminence was expressed, above all, in the auto industry.

In his unpublished second book, Hitler set out his perspective as follows: "Quite apart from the fact that in addition to all the European states that are struggling for the world market as export nations, the American union is now also the stiffest competitor in many areas. The size and wealth of its internal market permits production levels and thus production facilities that decrease the cost of the product to such a degree that, despite the enormous wages, underselling no longer seems at all possible.... [T]he size of the internal American market and its wealth of buying power and also ... raw materials guarantee the American automobile industry internal sales figures that alone permit production methods that would simply be impossible in Europe due to lack of internal sales opportunities." Only a market of comparable size could meet the American economic threat.

But a pan-European movement, a kind of formal unification, Hitler insisted, would not be able to counter the power of the United States. European unification had to be accomplished under the leadership of a dominant nation, Germany. "In the future," he wrote, "the only state that will be able to stand up to North America will be the state that has understood how—through the character of its internal life as well as through the substance of its external policy—to raise the racial value of its people and bring it into the practical national form for this purpose.... It is

... the duty of the National Socialist movement to strengthen and prepare our own fatherland to the greatest degree possible for this task." [6] Hitler did not invent the doctrine of *Lebensraum*, achieved through military conquest and aimed at elevating Germany to the status of a world power. It was the program of a decisive section of the German bourgeoisie. It was imposed on the newly-born Soviet Union in 1918, under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, enabling Germany to appropriate vast resource-rich areas of the Ukraine and Russia.

British imperialism was no less ruthless in pursuit of its interests than Germany—the crucial difference being that Britain's global economic and military power rested upon an already acquired, vast empire. Looking to Britain as an example to be admired and followed, Hitler often spoke of Russia becoming "our India" as he anticipated the military conquest of the Soviet Union.

The position of Britain was summed up very clearly by the First Sea Lord, Sir Ernle Chatfield in 1934: "We are in the remarkable position of not wanting to quarrel with anybody because we have got most of the world already, or the best parts of it, and we only want to keep what we have got and prevent others from taking it away from us." [7]

Britain was not opposed to Germany strengthening its position on the European continent. Indeed, it saw such a development as a useful counter-balance to France, while holding out the hope that Germany would attack the Soviet Union. It was only when it became clear that the rise of Germany would threaten the position of Britain herself that war was declared. And throughout the war, Britain fought not to defend democracy but to preserve its Empire.

With the entry of the Soviet Union into the war in 1941, Britain delayed the launching of a second front for as long as possible, with the result that some 65 percent of Allied military deaths were incurred by the Soviet Union. Rather than launching a second front, Churchill preferred to undertake military operations in North Africa, in order to protect British interests in the Middle East and Mediterranean. In the last days of the war, he even considered organizing an operation using Allied divisions and the remains of Hitler's armies to expel the Russians from Poland. Such a venture would have ended in a disaster ... but the sacrifice of countless lives was never a problem for Churchill when it came to the defence of the Empire.

Japan had announced its arrival as a world power with its defeat of Russia in the war of 1904-5. In World War I it was allied with Britain against Germany. The 1929 collapse had a devastating impact on the Japanese economy. Its main export market—the sale of silk to the United States—disappeared almost overnight. For Japan, as for Germany, the road to economic expansion lay not through the world market—by 1933 that had virtually disappeared, with the contraction of international trade by two thirds from 1929 levels. Where Germany turned East to the resources of the Ukraine and Russia, Japan looked West—to China. Japan's invasion and occupation of Manchuria in 1931 was followed in 1937 by its invasion of the rest of the country. However this brought Japan into conflict with the United States, which opposed the closing off of China and the rise of a Japanese Empire in the Pacific. The ocean was to be an American, not a Japanese, lake.

Of all the capitalist great powers, the United States appeared to be the only one not in pursuit of an empire. But the "anti-imperialism" of the United States was no less an expression of its fundamental economic interests than the imperialism of its rivals. Having arrived relatively late on the world scene, it proclaimed the principle of the "open door" as it

sought to dismantle the existing empires. The US was “anti-imperialist” in the same way that Britain, when it was the dominant economic power in the nineteenth century, was the champion of “free trade”—seeking to open up the markets of the world for its exports.

The US had risen to power through the exploitation of the resources of an entire continent. But now even the wealth of North and South America was no longer sufficient. The US had intervened in World War I to ensure that it had a hand in establishing the post-war world economic and political order. After tremendous economic expansion during the 1920s, the economic collapse of the 1930s and, above all, the failure of the New Deal, revealed that the problems confronting American capitalism could only be resolved on a global scale. Such was the dynamism and high productivity of American industry, it could not continue in a world constricted by the empires of the other imperialist powers.

In 1914, Leon Trotsky wrote, Germany had gone to war in order to organize Europe. America was now confronted with the task of organizing the world. With the development of new systems of management and assembly-line production, American capitalism had lifted the productivity of labour to new levels, but everywhere its expansion was blocked. “Everyone defends himself against everybody else,” Trotsky wrote in his 1934 article *Nationalism and Economic Life*, “protecting himself by a customs wall and a hedge of bayonets. Europe buys no goods, pays no debts and, in addition, arms herself. With five miserable divisions, starved Japan seizes a whole country. The most advanced technique in the world suddenly seems impotent before obstacles basing themselves on a much lower technique. The law of the productivity of labour seems to lose its force. But it only seems so. The basic law of human history must inevitably take revenge on derivative and secondary phenomena. Sooner or later American capitalism must open up ways for itself through the length and breadth of our entire planet. By what methods? By all methods. A high coefficient of productivity also denotes a high coefficient of destructive force. Am I preaching war? Not in the least. I am not preaching anything. I am only attempting to analyze the world situation and to draw conclusions from the laws of economic mechanics.”

World War II was not a war of democracy versus fascism but a struggle among the major imperialist powers for the redivision of the world. German imperialism sought the conquest of Europe, and, above all, the defeat of the Soviet Union, to secure an economic base from which it could compete with the United States. Japanese imperialism sought to establish an empire in the East to exploit the resources of China and South-East Asia. Britain already had an empire and sought to retain it against would-be usurpers. The United States, having outgrown its continental beginnings, now required the whole world to secure its continued economic expansion. It was hostile to German imperialism, Japanese imperialism, and, as Churchill discovered, sought the dismantling of the British Empire.

The war took the political form of a conflict between democracy and fascism and militarism for reasons that can be clearly seen. The democracy of Great Britain was not a result of the sanctity of the long traditions of English freedom, but rested on the material resources of the empire. The concessions made by the ruling class at home were made possible by the resources it extracted through its colonial domination of hundreds of millions of people all over the world. Democracy in Britain rested on the denial of democracy to the masses of the Indian subcontinent. The United States was able to make political concessions and retain democratic forms due to the wealth it extracted from a vast continent. All the efforts of the democracies were aimed at maintaining their privileged positions against their rivals. The ruling classes were more

than prepared to abandon democracy and make an accommodation with fascism if that were necessary. That was the great lesson of France—in many ways the home of modern bourgeois democracy—where the bourgeoisie immediately capitulated to Hitler in June 1940 and established the puppet Vichy regime, rather than risk opening the way for the coming to power of the working class. It was much better to suffer the inconvenience of Nazism than risk losing everything.

Throughout the 1930s, Trotsky insisted time and again that war could not be prevented unless there was a socialist revolution. War could not be halted without the overturn of the old ruling classes, no matter how great the antiwar sentiments of the masses, no matter how profound the horror at the death and destruction it would bring, because it arose from the innermost contradictions and driving forces of the capitalist system itself.

This signified that the struggle to resolve the crisis of proletarian leadership was the most decisive question, and was why Trotsky insisted, notwithstanding his gigantic role in the Russian Revolution, that the founding of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, in 1938 was the most important work of his life. So long as the leadership of the working class remained in the hands of social democracy and Stalinism, then war was inevitable. It was the betrayals of these leaderships that accelerated the drive to war.

If the ruling classes were in any way fearful of what the launching of a war might unleash, these fears were significantly eased by the events in Spain and France in 1936. The Spanish Revolution, which began in 1936, and the civil war that continued until 1939, was not defeated. It was betrayed. The Stalinists and the murder squads of the Soviet Union’s secret police, the GPU, worked consciously for the defeat of the working class. This was Stalin’s guarantee to the world bourgeoisie of his opposition to the extension of the socialist revolution internationally. At the same time, the centrists and the anarchists evaded the critical task of advancing the struggle for power, entered bourgeois governments, and prepared the way for the victory of Franco.

In France, the potentially revolutionary situation that developed with the General Strike of 1936 was sabotaged as the working class was subordinated to the bourgeois Popular Front government. Far from preventing fascism, the popular front only opened the door for it—demonstrated so clearly in the events of May 1940 in France.

The danger of a new world war

These lessons have burning relevance to the present situation. Reviewing the history of World War I and World War II, the question immediately arises: could this happen again? Let us consider again the point emphasized by Lenin. Peace arises from war and, at the same time, peace prepares the way for the eruption of new wars.

In 1945, the bloody 30-year conflict that had started in Europe in 1914 and then engulfed the entire world, came to an end with the victory of the United States and its allies, and of the Soviet Union, over Nazi Germany and Japan. The post-war order that brought peace among the imperialist powers, along with economic expansion, rested on two foundations: the economic dominance of the United States over its imperialist rivals, and the Cold War, which served at least to regulate, while not entirely suppressing, conflicts among the imperialist powers. The division of

Europe into East and West solved the “German question”—the spark that had ignited two global conflicts.

Both these pillars of what might be called Pax Americana have collapsed. The consequence has been the growth, over the past 20 years, of military violence and outright gangsterism, of a kind not seen since the 1930s. Let us again recall Lenin’s analysis. A general peace, established either through the dominance of a single imperialist power or through an agreement among several such powers cannot be maintained indefinitely. This is because capitalist development takes place unevenly, and the economic relationships between the powers that established the agreement will inevitably change. This is what has taken place since World War II.

The economic supremacy of the United States has been steadily eroding since 1945, not least due to the very expansion of the world capitalist economy made possible by the post-war settlement. The economic rise of defeated powers Germany and Japan—a process necessary for the economic stability of US capitalism itself—led to a decline in the relative supremacy of the US. A qualitative turning point in this process came in 1971 when, after a steadily growing balance of payments deficit, followed by a trade deficit, the Nixon administration withdrew the gold backing from the US dollar and shattered the Bretton Woods monetary system that had formed a pillar of the global economic order. By the late 1980s, the United States, formerly the world’s leading creditor nation, had become its biggest debtor.

Today, not only has the internal rot and decay at the heart of the US financial system been revealed, it is confronted by the rise of new powers, China and India, as well as the resurgence of old ones, demanding their place in the sun. As Lenin explained, the uneven development of capitalism itself has shattered the economic foundations on which former political relationships rested. New relationships are not going to be established peacefully, but through conflict.

In fact, the process is already well underway. That is the significance of the eruption of imperialist violence over the past two decades. The collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s was seized on by the US as the opportunity to counter its economic decline through the use of its preponderant military might. This is what was meant by the so-called “unipolar” moment. Since then the United States has launched a series of wars. The Gulf War in 1990 was followed by the dismantling of Yugoslavia through the decade and then the launching of war against Serbia in 1999. The Clinton administration almost launched a second war against Iraq in 1998. Then came the events of September 11, 2001, which the Bush administration seized upon to set in motion well-developed plans to invade Afghanistan, followed by the Iraq war in 2003. Now, under the Obama administration, the war in Afghanistan is being stepped up and extended into Pakistan as well. As the United States seeks to establish control over the vast resources of Central Asia, nothing resembles its actions so much as Nazi Germany during the decade of the 1930s.

The real questions before us concern not so much the possibility of another global war, but rather how long before it erupts and what can be done to prevent it.

To illustrate the issues at stake I would like to turn to a recently-published book entitled *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* by Alex Callinicos. Mr Callinicos is a leading member of the British Socialist Workers Party and considers himself a Marxist, a Leninist and a revolutionary. After a theoretical and historical review of imperialism, he comes to the following conclusion: “Continuing US hegemony over the other regions of advanced capitalism provides considerable support for

Serfati’s conclusion that ‘there is no risk that the inter-capitalist economic rivalries among the countries of the trans-Atlantic zone will develop into military confrontations, as was the case with the inter-imperialist rivalries of the twentieth century that ended up in the world wars.’” [8] So there you have it. Everyone can rest easy.

According to Callinicos, the factors that make inter-imperialist war “improbable” are the overwhelming military superiority of the US, the inter-dependence of the advanced economies, the political solidarity binding them together and the existence of nuclear weapons as a disincentive to war. With the exception of nuclear weapons, all these factors were cited in the first decade of the twentieth century by the author Norman Angell among others. But war broke out nonetheless.

What have been the experiences of the financial crisis of 2007-2008? Notwithstanding all the claims by various “left” and so-called “Marxist” academics that Lenin’s analysis no longer applies, and that it is no longer possible to identify particular capitalist powers with definite corporate and financial interests, what happened in the biggest economic crisis in three quarters of a century? What was the test of events? All the major governments rushed to defend their own banking systems and their own corporations, even as they paid lip service to the need for a co-ordinated international response.

Callinicos does not deny that the US is projecting its military power. But he points out that this power is being projected “outwards, in the name of the ‘international community’, beyond the frontiers of advanced capitalism into dangerous border zones”. As any student of World War I and World War II knows, and as Callinicos himself well knows, these inter-imperialist conflicts began precisely in the “border zones”. Neither the Balkans nor Poland, nor Manchuria, were at the centre of the world capitalist economy. Nor is Georgia today, but one should recall the tensions that erupted there in the middle of 2008 in the conflict with Russia. It is in the so-called “border zones” that the interests of the different imperialist powers intersect and collide. That is the case in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Central Asia, around the Caspian, on the African continent and at numerous other flashpoints around the world. Callinicos puts himself forward as an opponent of capitalism and imperialism. But what perspective does he advance? The twenty-first century, he concludes, is “unlikely” to be characterized by a consensual concert of the great powers. The remedy is “replacing capitalism with a democratic and progressive alternative” not, it should be noted, with the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of international socialism.

The mounting global economic and political tensions point to the danger of a renewed world war. How can it be prevented? Only through the intervention of the masses into the historical process.

However, these masses must be armed with an independent program and perspective. Millions of people the world over sought to intervene and prevent the Iraq war through the global demonstrations of February 2003. But the weakness of this movement and the source of its failure was that it had no independent program. It was subordinated to the parties of the imperialist bourgeoisie, the Democrats in the US, the Labor Party in Australia, or entertained vain hopes that France, the United Nations or some other power would intervene to stop the war. The consequences of such an orientation were graphically summed up in a revealing photograph, published last week, of Labor Defence Minister John Faulkner presenting an honorary Order of Australia medallion to US General David Petraeus, the architect of the Iraq “surge”.

The great issue rising before us is the following: Capitalism is once

again threatening to plunge human civilization into a catastrophe. Mankind got through the twentieth century ... but, it must be said, only by the skin of its teeth. Time here is of the essence. Everything depends on political rearming the working class and imbuing it with the culture of international socialism. It is to this task that the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its Australian section the SEP, is dedicated. I urge you to play your part in ensuring the future of mankind by joining its ranks.

Notes:

[1] Winston Churchill, "Zionism Versus Bolshevism" *Illustrated Sunday Herald* February 8, 1920 [return]

[2] cited in Robert Black, *Stalinism in Britain*, New Park Publications, London 1970 [return]

[3] Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke*, Simon and Schuster, New York 2008, p. 117 [return]

[4] Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke*, p. 236 [return]

[5] *New York Times*, March 9, 1995 [return]

[6] Gerard L. Weinberg ed., *Hitler's Second Book*, Enigma Books, New York 2003, pp.107, 116 [return]

[7] cited in Callinicos *Imperialism and Global Political Economy*, Polity, Cambridge 2009, p. 168 [return]

[8] Callinicos, p. 217 [return]



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