

Meetings at Leipzig Book Fair: The relevance of Trotsky's *Europe at War*

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This year's Leipzig Book Fair experienced a new record attendance with 175,000 visitors over four days last week. When one includes the series of meetings and literary events taking place in the city of Leipzig itself, this total rises to 237,000.

Unlike the annual Frankfurt Book Fair in autumn, which is strongly oriented to commercial interests, the Leipzig Book Fair provides an opportunity for readers to meet their favorite authors and hear them speak. At each of the five exhibition halls there are several forums where talks and lectures are held every half hour. Many television and radio stations also report live from the fair.

The high number of visitors was an expression of the desire to get information and be educated independently from the mainstream media. This was also demonstrated in the powerful response to the two meetings organized by Mehring Verlag (Mehring Books).

Drawing on recent political developments, Mehring Books presented Leon Trotsky's book *Europe at War*, which it first published in a German translation in 1998. The meetings drew from Trotsky's analysis of the first imperialist world war to shed light on the current threat of war as a result of the aggressive actions of the German and US governments in Ukraine.

A leaflet advertising the meetings was distributed in several thousand copies and was warmly received. Many young people who attend the fair for its attractions, including a comic book section, showed considerable political interest. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Only a handful of people defended the official government line, which presents the developments in Kiev as a democratic uprising.

Around 90 people attended the book presentation in Hall 3. The forum was filled to the last seat. Several visitors thanked the speakers at the end of the presentation and purchased copies of Trotsky's *Europe at War*. A number then came later to a further two-hour meeting organized by Mehring Books to discuss the political issues in more detail.

Below we are publishing the contribution on Trotsky's book given by Peter Schwarz, a member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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The book I am presenting today is a hundred years old. Leon Trotsky wrote the reports, articles, essays and letters contained in the book in the first three years of the First World War. Despite the lapse of time, Trotsky's work remains more lively, interesting and relevant than most of the books on the subject that have appeared in recent months.

The reason is Trotsky's ability to observe and record political events, to probe their background and to sum up their significance. It was no accident that in a discussion with Walter Benjamin the German playwright Bertolt Brecht described Trotsky as "the greatest living writer in Europe."

Trotsky describes his conversations with soldiers and representatives of different social layers and political currents. He comments on the course of the war and analyzes the strategy that was to mark the rest of the war: a war of attrition characterised by the mass slaughter of soldiers on both

sides of the trenches. He describes the fate of a Belgian infantry regiment caught up in the hell of trench warfare. He describes the destiny of a Serbian carpenter who gets caught between opposing camps in the Balkans.

He denounces the lies of the media and the war propaganda promulgated by social democracy. In the following extract Trotsky describes the mood in Vienna shortly after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo:

"Vienna clad itself in official mourning, although the great masses of the city's population paid mighty little attention to the news of the destruction of the heir to the throne of the Hapsburgs. So the press had to set about the task of working up the popular feelings. It is difficult to find words that will correctly designate the truly colossal vileness to which the press of all Europe—nay, of all the world—has resorted and still does resort with regard to the events of the present war. In this indecent orgy, the black and yellow press of Austria-Hungary, distinguished neither by knowledge nor by talent, cannot be said to occupy an insignificant place. When the word was handed out from the centre, unseen to the public, from the diplomatic inferno in which the destinies of nations are hatched, the scribblers of every shade of political complexion, after the Sarajevo shooting, spewed forth more lies than had ever before been seen in the history of the world."

But Trotsky writes not only as a brilliant observer and author, he writes as a revolutionary Marxist. Along with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Trotsky belonged to the minority faction in international social democracy, which did not capitulate to the war euphoria and the chauvinism of the belligerent countries at the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914, and remained faithful to their international convictions.

For Trotsky, Marxism is both a method of analysis, tracing the causes and driving forces of war, and also an expression of his unity with the great mass of the people in all of the warring countries.

After the initial confusion during the first months of the war, the latter was to come into conflict with the warmongers and rise up against them. Just seven months after Trotsky wrote the last article in this book in New York in March 1917, he stood at the head of the first victorious proletarian revolution in world history. With the October Revolution Russian workers not only ended the war, they also abolished its cause, capitalism.

Let me add a few remarks on the Marxist method. In the past few decades a systematic offensive against Marxism and all forms of scientific analysis of society has taken place at universities. According to the prevailing conceptions there is no objective truth. It is inadmissible to speak of objective causes in the historical processes or to examine the material social interests underlying a certain policy.

There are only different narratives. Truth is what two or more people agree upon. One can relate a narrative from the standpoint of gender, from the standpoint of violence or from any other point of view. It is not permissible, however, to examine history as the history of class struggles

and to analyze the material interests expressed and fought out in the historical process.

Such an approach—based on post-modernism, the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault and similar schools of thought—not only constitutes an assault on the science of history with sometimes absurd results, it is also directed against drawing lessons from history. It is used as a weapon against all who seek to learn from the experiences of the past century and who are determined to prevent that once again a generation is destroyed by dictatorship, fascism and war.

In this context I would like to recommend the article entitled “The War and the International”, which appears at the end of the present volume. Trotsky wrote it in Zurich in October 1914 and it was published in German in Munich. It is a brilliant analysis of the causes and driving forces of the First World War.

In contrast to all those who maintain that the imperialist powers “sleepwalked” into a war, which was the result of coincidences and misunderstandings and could have been prevented with better policies, Trotsky insists that the war was the necessary and inevitable product of capitalism’s inherent contradictions.

“The War and the International” begins with the words: “The forces of production which capitalism has evolved have outgrown the limits of nation and state. The national state, the present political form, is too narrow for the exploitation of these productive forces. The natural tendency of our economic system, therefore, is to seek to break through the state boundaries. The whole globe, the land and the sea, the surface as well as the interior has become one economic workshop, the different parts of which are inseparably connected with each other. This work was accomplished by capitalism. But in accomplishing it the capitalist states were led to struggle for the subjection of the world-embracing economic system to the profit interests of the bourgeoisie of each country. ...

“All talk of the present bloody clash being a work of national defense is either hypocrisy or blindness. On the contrary, the real, objective significance of the War is the breakdown of the present national economic centers, and the substitution of a world economy in its stead. But the way the governments propose to solve this problem of imperialism is not through the intelligent, organized cooperation of all of humanity’s producers, but through the exploitation of the world’s economic system by the capitalist class of the victorious country; which country is by this War to be transformed from a Great Power into the World Power.”

Marxism does not ignore the role of coincidence, just as it does not ignore the role of political leaders and parties. It has nothing to do with the dogmatic schemas established by the Stalinist bureaucracy when it transformed Marxism from a revolutionary doctrine into an ideology to justify its rule.

The Marxist method enabled Trotsky to connect events and actors and identify the essential driving forces out of complex and accidental developments. In this way he was able to draw a complex, distinctive and living portrait of the events of the war, which deserves its place equally in historical and aesthetic literature.

This is particularly apparent in his polemics against the Social Democrats. He does not stop at being outraged at the SPD, who betrayed its own program on the outbreak of the war and conducted disgusting pro-war propaganda. He connects the outrage with an analysis of the political reasons for this historic betrayal. In this way, he enables the reader to draw political lessons and prepare for the coming class battles.

Here is another extract from “The War and the International”:

“The Reformists on principle, who hoped to solve the social question by the way of tariff treaties, consumers’ leagues, and the parliamentary cooperation of the Social Democracy with the bourgeois parties, are now all resting their hopes on the victory of the ‘national’ arms. They are expecting the possessing classes to show greater willingness to meet the needs of the proletariat because it has proved its patriotism. This

expectation would be positively foolish if there were not hidden behind it another, far less ‘idealistic’ hope—that a military victory would create for the bourgeoisie a broader imperialistic field for enriching itself at the expense of the bourgeoisie of other countries, and would enable it to share some of the booty with its own proletariat at the expense of the proletariat of other countries. Socialist reformism has actually turned into socialist imperialism.”

Because Trotsky understood the contradictions and driving forces which led to the war, he also maintained his revolutionary confidence in the midst of the thunder of the cannons and the collapse of the Second International. “The War and the International” ends with the words:

“If the War got beyond the control of the Second International, its immediate consequences will get beyond the control of the bourgeoisie of the entire world. ... The revolutionary epoch will create new forms of organization out of the inexhaustible resources of proletarian Socialism, new forms that will be equal to the greatness of the new tasks. To this work we will apply ourselves at once, amid the mad roaring of the machine-guns, the crashing of cathedrals, and the patriotic howling of the capitalist jackals. We will keep our clear minds amid this hellish death music, our undimmed vision. We feel ourselves to be the only creative force of the future. Already there are many of us, more than it may seem. Tomorrow there will be more of us than today. And the day after tomorrow, millions will rise up under our banner, millions who even now, sixty-seven years after the Communist Manifesto, have nothing to lose but their chains.”

Trotsky’s book *Europe at War* is not only current because 2014 is the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I. Had I asked the question here five years ago if a crisis similar to the first and second world wars could be repeated, most would have answered “no”. Today I am no longer sure that the answer would be so categorical.

At the beginning of the year, the German government announced that the era of German military restraint was over. Since then they have collaborated with the United States and European Union to provoke a crisis in Ukraine which has taken NATO to the brink of war with Russia. And in spite of this, Washington and Berlin are continuing to intensify the conflict.

While broad sections of the population respond with horror and mistrust, the media, like in Vienna in 1914, is once again working up popular sentiment. To repeat Trotsky’s already cited words in this context, “It is difficult to find words that will correctly designate the truly colossal vileness to which the press of all Europe—nay, of all the world—has resorted and still does resort with regard to the events in *Ukraine*.”

I have only changed the last words from Trotsky’s original. Instead of “the events of the present war” I have inserted “the events in *Ukraine*.”

It is not possible to deal with the events in Ukraine in detail in the half hour available for this meeting. We will do so this afternoon, when we have a meeting room booked for two hours. Here I only want to mention some of the worst lies and misrepresentations spread by the German media about events in Ukraine.

The first concerns the EU association agreement, whose failure triggered the protests on the Maidan. It is always suggested that the association agreement would bring Ukrainians prosperity and democracy. But this is not the case.

The agreement excludes a simultaneous customs union with Russia, which will spell the end for large sections of Ukrainian industry, particularly that in the east which is oriented towards Russia. In addition, a precondition of the agreement is that Ukraine be subjected to the dictates of the IMF, which has demanded a tripling of gas prices for private households and massive cuts to pensions and social spending.

To sum up: the consequences of the association agreement would be a combination of the austerity measures in Greece and the end of the GDR (East Germany)—massive social devastation combined with the collapse of

industry. And this in a country that is already one of the poorest in the world.

The second misrepresentation concerns the role of the fascists in the Maidan protests. Their role was covered up and downplayed. But they were there, playing the key role in the overthrow of President Yanukovych. The party Svoboda now sits in government with three ministers as well as the state prosecutor. Their hero is Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis in World War II and was responsible for the murder of thousands of Jews and communists. Only 15 months ago, a delegation from Svoboda visited the neo-fascist NPD in Saxony's state parliament, a party that the German government considers unconstitutional and wishes to have banned.

The fact that the German government is cooperating with the heirs of such a Nazi collaborator would previously have been enough to alarm every critical journalist. Today it is considered self-evident; it is accepted, downplayed and justified. And this in the interest of policies which not only destabilise the entire region, but threaten a global armed conflict and a nuclear war, which would be lethal for humanity.

How is this transformation to be explained?

Firstly, it has been long in the making. Since reunification, Germany has systematically expanded its political and economic influence eastwards. Eastern Europe serves as a cheap labour platform for German industry, with wages that are in some regions lower than in China.

But the designs of German imperialism do not end at the borders of the former Soviet Union. For some time, and not without success, German business has tried to pursue its interests in consultation with the Putin regime, which represents the interests of Russia's oligarchs.

However, this ultimately failed due to the stance of the United States, who wished to reduce Russia's global weight for geo-strategic reasons—above all, after Putin blocked action against Syria and Iran and granted asylum to whistle-blower Edward Snowden. German foreign policy has now swung to the side of the United States and into a confrontation with Russia.

The position in which Russia finds itself confirms the catastrophic consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The propaganda in the Western media about Russian “expansionism” is absurd. Since the destruction of the USSR, large areas of the former Soviet Union and all of its allies in the eastern bloc have been integrated into American and European imperialism's sphere of influence.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, peaceful coexistence was the centerpiece of Stalinist foreign policy. Then under Gorbachev, the Kremlin bureaucracy acted as though imperialism was a Marxist invention. But imperialism is not a fiction. It is a brutal reality, and its geopolitical and economic interests exclude peaceful coexistence with Russia.

Germany and the United States never accepted that the October Revolution had robbed them of the direct control over the huge human and natural resources of such a vast country. Although the Soviet Union no longer exists, their imperialist appetite remains.

The aggressive foreign policy is closely connected with the major attacks on working people in Germany and throughout Europe. Since the economic crisis of 2008, Berlin has been dictating austerity and labour market policies to the EU, which are forcing large sections of the population to work harder for ever declining wages.

At the same time, a small layer at the top of society is gathering fabulous wealth, dominating the political parties and the media, and turning ever more openly to dictatorial measures to defend their rule. They are now employing the same ruthless methods in foreign policy. Class war domestically and war abroad are always connected.

It is high time to oppose these developments, which threaten today's younger generation with the same fate as their great-grandfathers experienced between 1914 and 1945. In this struggle, Trotsky's Marxist

analysis of the First World War is of immense value.



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