

The lessons of August 4, 1914

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Today marks the anniversary of that fateful day one hundred years ago when the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) voted in favor of credits for the Kaiser's army at the onset of World War I. The event is usually ignored or mentioned only in passing in the many publications, documentaries, exhibitions and special programs produced for the centenary of the war, yet the vote was of crucial historical importance.

Following the unanimous vote in favor of the motion for war credits in the Reichstag on August 4, 1914, SPD Chairman Hugo Haase declared: "We will not desert our fatherland in its hour of need." The assembled deputies broke out in cheers. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg and conservative German nationalist deputies had hoped to gain a majority in the vote, not anticipating unanimous support from the SPD for the war policy.

The deputies were well aware and fearful of opposition to war on the part of the workers. Just days before the parliamentary vote, hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Berlin against war.

In its appeal for the demonstration, the SPD wrote on July 25: "In the name of humanity and culture, the class-conscious proletariat of Germany declares its adamant opposition to the criminal activities of the warmongers. We urgently call upon the German government to exert its influence on the Austrian government to maintain peace, and if this shameful war cannot be stopped, to refrain from any sort of military intervention. Not a drop of blood of a German soldier should be sacrificed to the power intrigues of the Austrian rulers on behalf of imperialist profit interests."

This appeal was in full compliance with official party line. For over four decades, the SPD had educated workers on the basis of the principle of international solidarity and opposition to imperialism. In November 1912, it had played a leading role in the International Socialist Congress in Basel, making a powerful appeal

to European workers to oppose war.

The Congress manifesto, signed by all the major European socialist parties, read: "This congress... calls upon the workers of all countries to oppose capitalist imperialism with the power of the international solidarity of the working class."

The manifesto threatened the "ruling classes of all nations" with revolutionary consequences in the event of war, and warned: "It would be insane should governments not realise that the mere thought of the monstrosity of a world war would evoke the outrage and anger of the working class. The proletariat regards it as criminal if they be forced to shoot at one another in order to further the profits of capitalists and the ambitions of dynasties, or to honour secret diplomatic treaties."

On August 4, 1914, however, the SPD leadership broke with these principles and capitulated to the influence of national opportunism within the social democratic movement.

Rosa Luxemburg denounced the decision, writing: "Never before in the history of class struggles, since there have been political parties, has there been a party that, in this way, after fifty years of uninterrupted growth, after achieving a first-rate position of power, after assembling millions around it, has so completely and ignominiously abdicated as a political force within twenty-four hours as Social Democracy has done."

Luxemburg concluded: "On August 4th, 1914, German Social Democracy abdicated politically, and at the same time the Socialist International collapsed."

One year after the outbreak of war, Leon Trotsky, who was carefully observing the mood of the European masses, wrote: "Even though they were not in a position to stop the war or in its early phases call those governing to account, if the socialist parties had rejected any responsibility for the worldwide slaughter from the very start—how great would be the authority of

international socialism to which the masses, deceived by militarism and dejected by sorrow and growing need, would increasingly turn to as if to a true shepherd of the peoples!... And every liberation programme which each section of the battered International now drags through the bloody mire at the end of its flagpole would become a powerful reality for the offensive of the socialist proletariat against all the forces of the old society.”

In his penetrating analysis of the collapse of the Second International, *War and the International*, Trotsky explained the pressures that drove the growth of national opportunism. As was the case with the development of economy, the development of the labor movement had taken place mainly within the framework of nation states. It was all programs based on a national, rather than an international socialist, perspective that had collapsed for all time with the outbreak of World War I.

“The present war signalizes the collapse of the national states,” Trotsky wrote, continuing: “The Socialist parties of the epoch now concluded were national parties. They had become ingrained in the national states with all the different branches of their organizations, with all their activities and with their psychology. In the face of the solemn declarations at their congresses, they rose to the defense of the conservative state when imperialism, grown big on the national soil, began to demolish the antiquated national barriers. And in their historic crash, the national states have pulled down with them also the national Socialist parties.”

The Bolsheviks’ struggle against the national opportunism to which the SPD had capitulated prepared them politically for the revolutionary struggles that broke out in Russia in 1917. They led the working class in a victorious proletarian revolution in Russia, based on the perspective that the socialist revolution in Russia was the first blow in a world socialist revolution of the proletariat.

Already in 1903, Lenin had stressed in *What Is to Be Done* that socialist consciousness did not arise spontaneously from the class struggle, but had to be brought into the working class “from the outside” by the revolutionary party, i.e., from beyond immediate factory struggles.

Prevailing social consciousness is always bourgeois

consciousness, he explained. The task of the party therefore was to undertake a persistent, tireless and uncompromising political struggle against all forms of opportunism—the expression of bourgeois consciousness within the workers’ movement. The character of the party, and every aspect of its work and perspective, had to be directed towards this aim. The political independence of the working class could be established only through the constant struggle for revolutionary internationalism against national opportunism.

The confrontation between nuclear-armed powers and the risk of world war today resulting from the offensive of the United States and NATO against Russia over Ukraine, as well as Washington’s “pivot to Asia” directed against China, invest these lessons with immense contemporary significance.



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