

Writings of Trotsky from 1917

War or Peace? (Internal Forces of the Revolution)

Leon Trotsky
20 March 2017

The WSWWS is publishing new translations of Leon Trotsky's writings from February-March 1917. In many cases, these articles are now in English for the first time.

This article was published in the Russian-language New York newspaper Novy mir (New World) on March 20, 1917. It was published in Russian in Trotsky's 1923 Voina i Revoliutsiia (War and Revolution), vol. 2, pp. 440-443. It appeared in English in Trotsky Speaks. Below is an original translation.

The main question, which now interests the governments and peoples of the entire world, is: What influence will the Russian Revolution have on the course of the war? Will it bring peace any closer? Or, on the contrary, will all the enthusiasm of the people awakened by the revolution be directed at further conduct of the war?

This is a major question. On its resolution, one way or another, hinges not only the fate of the war, but also the fate of the revolution itself.

In 1905, Miliukov, today's wartime Minister of Foreign Affairs, called the Russo-Japanese War an adventure, and demanded that it be ended as soon as possible. The entire liberal and radical press wrote in the same vein. The strongest organizations of the industrialists called at that time—despite unprecedented defeats—for an immediate peace. How was this to be explained? They had hopes for domestic reforms. The establishment of a constitutional system; parliamentary control over the budget and the state economy in general; growth of the education system; and, in particular, the allotment of land to the peasants—were supposed to raise the economic level of the country, increase the well-being of the population and, consequently, create an enormous domestic market for industry. It is true that even then, twelve years ago, the Russian bourgeoisie was ready to seize foreign lands. But

it felt that the emancipation of the peasantry would create for its benefit an incomparably more powerful market than Manchuria or Korea.

It turned out, however, that democratization of the country and emancipation of the peasantry was not such a simple task. Neither the tsar, nor his bureaucracy, nor the nobility agreed voluntarily to yield a single iota of their rights. It was impossible by means of liberal exhortations to pry from their hands the state machinery and lands; what was needed was a mighty revolutionary offensive of the masses. This the bourgeoisie did not want. Agrarian uprisings by the peasants, the ever-sharpening struggle of the proletariat, and the growth of rebellion in the army drove the liberal bourgeoisie back into the camp of the tsarist bureaucracy and the reactionary nobility. Their alliance was sealed by the coup d'état of June 3, 1907. Out of this coup emerged the Third and present [Fourth] State Dumas.

The peasants did not receive land. The state structures changed more in form than in substance. The creation of a prosperous domestic market made of peasant property-owners, resembling American farmers, did not take place. Having reconciled themselves with the June-Third regime, the capitalist classes turned their attention to conquering foreign markets. A new period of Russian imperialism began—with a dissipated state and military economy, and insatiable appetites. Guchkov, the present War Minister, participated in the Commission of State Defense, which advocated a rapid expansion of the army and navy. Miliukov, the present Minister of Foreign Affairs, worked out a program of world conquests, and conveyed it throughout Europe.

A very large share of the responsibility for the present war lies on Russian imperialism and its Octobrist and Cadet representatives: In this area our Guchkovs and

Miliukovs have no right to reproach the bashibazouks of German imperialism—they are of the same kind.

By the grace of the revolution, which they did not want and against which they fought, Guchkov and Miliukov are today in power. They want to continue the war. They want victory. Of course! They are the ones who dragged the country into war for the sake of the interests of capital. All their opposition to tsarism stemmed from their unsatisfied imperialist appetites. As long as the clique of Nicholas II was in power, dynastic and reactionary-aristocratic interests prevailed in foreign policy. It was precisely for this reason that Berlin and Vienna have always hoped to conclude a separate peace with Russia. Now, however, the interests of pure imperialism are written on the governmental banner. “The tsarist government is no more,” the Guchkovs and Miliukovs tell the people, “now you must shed your blood for common national interests.” And the Russian imperialists understand national interests to be the return of Poland, as well as the conquest of Galicia, Constantinople, Armenia and Persia. In other words, Russia is now taking its place in the imperialist ranks along with other European states, and most of all, its allies: Britain and France.

In England, there is a parliamentary monarchy, in France, a republic. Both there and here, liberals and even social-patriots are in power. But this does not change in the least the imperialist character of the war; on the contrary, it only reveals it more clearly. And in England and France the revolutionary workers are waging an irreconcilable struggle against the war.

The transition from a dynastic-aristocratic imperialism to an imperialism that is purely bourgeois can in no way reconcile the proletariat of Russia with the war. The international struggle against world-wide slaughter and imperialism is now our task more than ever before. And the latest telegrams, announcing anti-war agitation on the streets of Petrograd, show that our comrades are courageously fulfilling their duty.

The imperialist boasting of Miliukov—to crush Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey—now more than ever plays into the hands of Hohenzollern and Habsburg. Even before the new liberal-imperialist government has begun to reform its army, it is helping Hohenzollern to raise the patriotic spirit and restore the crumbling “national unity” of the German people. If the German proletariat is given the right to think that the entire people, including the main force of the revolution, the Russian proletariat, stand behind the new bourgeois government, this would be a terrible blow to our co-thinkers, the

revolutionary socialists of Germany. Transforming the Russian proletariat into patriotic cannon-fodder in the service of the Russian liberal bourgeoisie would immediately hurl the German working-class masses into the camp of chauvinism, and would delay the development of the revolution in Germany for a long time.

The main obligation of the revolutionary proletariat in Russia is to show that there is no force behind the evil imperialist will of the liberal bourgeoisie, for it does not have the support of the working-class masses. The Russian revolution must reveal its real face to the world, that is, its irreconcilable hostility not only to the dynastic-aristocratic reaction, but to liberal imperialism as well.

The further development of the revolutionary struggle and the creation of a Revolutionary Workers’ Government, supported by the genuine people, will strike a mortal blow against Hohenzollern, for it will give a mighty stimulus to the revolutionary movement of the German proletariat, as well as the working-class masses in the other European countries. If the first Russian revolution of 1905 brought in its wake revolutions in Asia—in Persia, Turkey, China—then the second Russian revolution will serve as the beginning of a powerful social-revolutionary struggle in Europe. Only this struggle will bring genuine peace to a Europe drenched in blood.

No, the Russian proletariat will not allow itself to be harnessed to the chariot of Miliukov’s imperialism. On the banner of the Social-Democracy of Russia, the slogans of uncompromising internationalism now burn more clearly than ever before:

Down with the imperialist predators!
Long live the Revolutionary Workers’
Government!
Long live peace and the brotherhood of nations!

Novy mir, 20 March 1917.



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