

From the archives of the Revolution

Speech on the question of war

Leon Trotsky
21 June 2017

This is a new translation of an account that appeared in the newspaper Novaia Zhizn' [New Life] on June 15 (June 2, O.S.) of a speech delivered by Trotsky the previous day (June 14/1) before the United Session of the Social-Democratic Members of the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets on the Question of War.

Trotsky said that it was necessary, first of all, to pose the question about the class character of the war, and whether it had changed its character after the Russian revolution.

“We,” said the orator, “do not fear bloodshed. If we are speaking against the war, then it is because it has been and still is an imperialist war. Insofar as the Russian bourgeoisie is bound up with the international market and capital, the war remains a struggle of the bourgeois class for world domination. In these conditions, to strengthen the fighting capacity of the army means to create an apparatus for the imperialist classes of the new Russia. In all its various degrees of longitude and latitude, regardless of state forms, the main goal of the present war remains unchanged. The weakness of our bourgeoisie is expressed, on the one hand, by the fact that it has still not mastered the apparatus of material repression—Kerensky is starting to do this now—in order to subordinate the army to itself, and on the other hand, it has not perfected the deceitful phraseology which the West-European bourgeoisie uses to deceive the masses. In France, at the start of the war, we have heard the kinds of speeches given by Dan, Tsereteli, and Skobelev here in Russia, but the ones in France were more eloquent. The Russian bourgeoisie does not have much experience in deceiving the masses with democratic clamor. Does that then mean that we must take up the job which the Russian bourgeoisie cannot handle? To create an effective army in such conditions means to go against the revolution.

Kerensky is moving toward that goal, disbanding the revolutionary detachments, persecuting the Kronstadters, making it inevitable that there will be actions against the Petrograd revolutionary regiments ...

None of us stands for a separate peace. But if the danger of a separate peace exists, then it is due to the tactics of the Provisional Government. Secret negotiations are not published, the allies answer us with one insult after another, and the army sees no reply to the question about why they should shed their blood. The blissful time has already passed when the Russian soldier died as Karataev [1] did, as part of the ‘sacred herd.’ In such conditions, the army cannot help but come apart at the seams. It is strange to think that this material and moral collapse can be avoided by Kerensky’s poetry in prose. They tell us that hope for a European revolution is a utopia. But the possibility of creating an army capable of fighting under a bourgeois-landowners’ government is 200,000 times more problematic than the onset of the European revolution. They say to us: ‘And what if there is an offensive?’ We reply: If there is no revolution in Europe, then Russian freedom will be crushed anyway by the coalition forces of our allies and adversaries. All the social experiments that the course of events is forcing upon us are a threat to the entirety of European capital. Could it be possible that capital will not try, through world-wide violence, to liquidate the Russian revolution? Whoever does not believe in the possibility of a European revolution must expect that all of our freedom will turn to ashes.”

Trotsky was skeptical about the conference [2] called by the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. “We are dealing,” he said, “with the convening of socialist diplomats. In England, and in Germany, the undoing of the revolution has begun, and the Soviet

enters into negotiations with ‘socialists’ who are fighting against the revolution. Our guest, the British minister-socialist Henderson, has filled three prisons with revolutionaries. Scheidemann holds Liebknecht in prison. With whom would we be meeting in Stockholm? With Scheidemann or with Liebknecht?... With Henderson or with Maclean? The Soviet must tell these ‘socialists’: Try first of all to free our friends, and only then will we talk with you. We cannot sit down with butchers. We must be together with their victims. If we pose the question openly, our words will find an echo...”

Novaia Zhizn' [New Life], ? 38,

2/15 June 1917

Notes by the Editors of Trotsky's Works:

[1] Karataev—a thoughtful peasant type, who at the same time firmly believed in higher forces regulating life; introduced by Lev Tolstoy in his famous novel *War and Peace*.

[2] Here we must once again note that *Novaia Zhizn'* is distorting the author's position. Trotsky's attitude toward the war, the collapse of the International, and the treachery of the social-patriots was so unambiguous, that the orator could not help but express a sharply negative opinion of the Stockholm Conference, which is also evident from the articles he wrote contemporaneously. When we asked him about this, Trotsky answered as follows:

“The speech has clearly been retouched; the concluding paragraph of the account says: ‘Trotsky was skeptical about the Stockholm Conference’... The word ‘skeptical’, of course, absolutely did not express my attitude, as is clear, by the way, from the later text, where I, even according to the paper's account, say that we cannot sit down with butchers when we are at the same time siding with their victims. *Novaia Zhizn'* was fully in favor of the Stockholm Conference and tried in its article to weaken criticism of it.”



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