

Great powers commemorate First World War, and plan the next one

Andre Damon

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Over the past weekend, the leaders of the world's great powers met in France to commemorate the official end of World War I. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and US President Donald Trump pulled long faces, hugged each other and gave speeches lamenting the "horror" and "tragedy" of a war that claimed more than 16 million lives.

But their talk of "tragedy" and "suicide" could not hide the fact that they are all engaged in active preparations for a new and deadly world military conflict.

Trump, as usual, did not feel the need to hide his love of bloodshed. His speech at the Suresnes American Cemetery just outside Paris was a jingoistic rant. Trump praised the "great warriors" who "fought through hell to turn the tide of the war" and lauded the "ferocious" American marines who were termed "Devil Dogs" by the terrified German soldiers.

Unlike Merkel and Macron, the American President did not give an inch to the idea, universally acknowledged throughout the world since the fall of the Third Reich, that World War I was a disaster, in which millions were slaughtered either through the ignorance of generals or the avarice of politicians and industrialists. It was, in the words of Trump, a "noble" struggle to bring "peace" and defend "civilization."

The speeches of Macron and Merkel betrayed the same bloody sentiments merely covered over with a dirty layer of dishonesty. Macron styled his speech as a condemnation of "nationalism," while Merkel lamented the war as a "hideous labyrinth of merciless battles," as "senseless bloodshed" caused by "national arrogance and military hubris."

But Macron's speech was, in its content, a celebration of the great lie peddled by the Germano-French fascist movement: that the "Great war" was an all-pervasive moment of national unity, in which social and class divisions were cast aside for the defense of the fatherland.

For the fighters, Macron said, "France symbolized all that was beautiful in the world." The soldiers in the trenches were "our family, the family that we belong to today," creating "one France ... popular and bourgeois."

This statement was entirely consistent with Macron's declaration just a few days earlier that Philippe Pétain, the Nazi-collaborationist dictator of Vichy France who sent tens of thousands of Jews and anti-fascists to their deaths, was a "great soldier."

For Merkel's part, her invocation of the "horrors" of the first world war were coupled with appeals for Germany to end its "isolation" by becoming a great power. The Chancellor declared: "The First World War showed us what kind of ruin isolationism can lead us into. And if seclusion wasn't a solution 100 years ago, how could it be so today?"

What an absurd lie. Every freshman history textbook makes it clear that the war was not caused by Germany's "isolationism" but by the desire of Kaiser and Chancellor to secure what Wilhelm II called Germany's "Place in the Sun"—colonial possessions at the expense of her competitors who had arrived earlier on the world arena.

It was to secure German world power that Merkel's predecessor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, said in 1914 that the object of his regime was to "lay the foundations for German predominance in Europe."

With very minor modifications, these are the sentiments animating the Chancellery of the Federal Republic, as expressed by its leading ideologists. In the words of Humboldt University professor Herfried Münkler, Germany must become the "taskmaster" of Europe, exercising "determined political and economic leadership" over the continent.

On the other side of the Rhine, the sentiments of the ruling classes are just as warlike. Just days after Macron's speech, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire called for the formation of a "European Empire" to compete

economically and militarily with the United States and China. While the population of Europe, given the horrors of two world wars, will find such talk of empire “unattractive ... in tomorrow’s world, it’s going to be all about power ... Europe cannot be shy any longer about using its power.”

Le Maire concluded, “Everybody knows it takes guts to stand in the way of Donald Trump’s administration ... The people of Europe have had enough of the babble.”

This is a deliberate and conscious restatement of German chancellor Bismarck’s adage that leadership will be decided not by “liberalism but by power,” not by “speeches,” but by “blood and iron.”

Such militarist, and essentially fascistic, sentiments are expressed not only in words, but in deeds.

US President Donald Trump, with the support of a Democratic opposition that functions largely as a rubber-stamp for his assault on democracy, has embarked upon the largest military build-up since the Cold War, withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) nuclear treaty with Russia and massively expanding the United States’ nuclear arsenal. He has begun deploying 15,000 troops on American soil, asserted the right to overturn constitutional amendments by executive fiat and started the construction of concentration camps capable of holding tens of thousands.

Macron, pursuing his country’s own breakneck military rearmament, has pushed for the creation of a “European army” to counter the United States and China, to be paid for by the types of anti-worker austerity policies his government is pioneering.

Merkel presides over a grand coalition government dedicated to military rearmament and the projection of power overseas. She, too, supervises the construction of concentration camps to hold helpless refugees. Her government is a den of crypto-fascists, exemplified by the recently-fired head of the country’s secret service, Hans-Georg Maassen, who defended neo-Nazi rioters who attacked Jews and foreigners.

In collaboration with the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD), Maassen authored a report placing those who oppose capitalism, including the Socialist Equality Party, under surveillance as “left-wing extremists.” And in the latest exposure of the viper’s lair that is the German military/intelligence apparatus, the news weekly *Focus Magazine* reported that internal army investigations have uncovered a massive plot by as many as 200 military personnel to round up and murder left-wing politicians.

Today’s drive toward military conflict on the part of the

great powers is rooted in the same fundamental contradictions of capitalism—between the world economy and the outmoded nation-state system, and between socialized production and the private ownership of the means of production—that led to two world wars in the 20th century.

It is also fueled by intensifying domestic political and social tensions within each of the major imperialist countries. The governments of Macron, Trump and Merkel are all broadly hated as direct instruments of a corrupt financial oligarchy. These governments see in war not only the pretext to use police-state repression against their opponents, but for the promotion of far-right forces to create a constituency for their policies of militarism and austerity and to use as shock troops against the growing struggles of the working class.

We live, as *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board chairman David North has argued, in the “Unfinished 20th Century.” All the demons that plagued the last century return to vex our own. But this means that the tasks confronting humanity remain the same. The bloodletting of the First World War was ended by two revolutions: in Russia and in Germany. It was the bloody suppression of the German Revolution, at the hands of the Social Democrats and the Freikorps, and the protracted degeneration and betrayal of the Russian Revolution under the Stalinist bureaucracy that allowed the specter of world war to return.

The antipode to world war, now as then, is the international working class, armed with the program of socialist internationalism. It is the fear of this vast and powerful social force that drives the bourgeoisie to war and dictatorship, and it is this social force that must be mobilized to oppose the return of imperialist barbarism.



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