

The Causes and Consequences of World War II

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David North delivered the following lecture at San Diego State University on October 5, 2009, marking the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War and the staggering annihilation of millions of human beings a mere 25 years after the “war to end all wars” of 1914–18.

We are republishing the lecture today ahead of the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the war on September 1.

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The main concern of this lecture is not the specific conflicts and events that triggered World War II, but rather the war’s more general causes.

Given the massive scale of the cataclysm that unfolded between 1939 and 1945, it is simplistic, even absurd, to seek the causes of the war primarily in the diplomatic conflicts that led up to the hostilities—such as the dispute over the Danzig Corridor—apart from their broader historical context.

Any consideration of the causes of World War II must proceed from the fact that the development of global military conflict between 1939 and 1945 followed by only twenty-five years the first global military conflict, which occurred between 1914 and 1918. Only twenty-one years passed between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. Another way of looking at it is that within the space of just thirty-one years, two catastrophic global wars were fought.

To put this in a contemporary perspective, the time span between 1914 and 1945 is the same as between 1978—the midpoint of the Carter administration—and 2009. To maintain this sense of historical perspective—making the necessary shift in historical time—let us consider that someone born in 1960 would have been eighteen years old in 1978, that is, old enough to be drafted to fight in a war. If he or she survived, that person would have been only twenty-two at the end of the war. He or she would have been just forty-three when the second war began and only forty-nine when it was over.

What does this mean in very human and personal terms? By the time this individual reached the age of fifty, he or she would have witnessed, directly or indirectly, a staggering level of violence. He would have probably known very many people who were killed in the course of these wars.

Of course, the scale of one’s personal acquaintance with death during the two wars depended on where one happened to live. The experience of the average American was not the same as that of the average person in England, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, China or Japan.

The human cost of the world wars

For World War I, estimates of total deaths range from nine million to over sixteen million. Combat-related deaths accounted for 6.8 million of the total number. Another two million military deaths were caused by accidents, disease and the effect of POW camp incarceration.

Figures 1 and 2 give a breakdown of the death toll by country for World War I. These were staggering losses. The millions of deaths that were directly caused by the war were followed almost immediately, after the Armistice, by the deaths of another twenty million people as a result of the influenza epidemic that devastated the physically weakened populations. [1]

The human cost of World War II exceeded by far that of the First World War. Military deaths totaled twenty-two to twenty-five million, including the deaths of five million prisoners of war. Let us examine the death tolls suffered by a number of countries most directly involved in the maelstrom. Poland lost more than 16 percent of its population. The Soviet Union lost approximately 14 percent. Eleven percent of the population of Greece was killed. Other countries that lost at least 10 percent of their populations were Lithuania and Latvia. Other countries that lost at least 3 percent of their people were Estonia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Romania, Singapore and Yugoslavia.

Included in this catalog of death is the genocidal annihilation of European Jewry. Six million Jews were murdered between 1939 and 1945. This includes three million Polish Jews and nearly one million Ukrainian Jews. In terms of percentages, 90 percent of the Jews in Poland, the Baltic countries and Germany were killed. More than 80 percent of Czechoslovak Jews were murdered. More than 70 percent of Dutch, Hungarian and Greek Jews were exterminated. Approximately 60 percent of Yugoslav and Belgian Jews were killed. More than 40 percent of Norwegian Jews were exterminated. More than 20 percent of French, Bulgarian and Italian Jews were murdered.

This genocidal campaign was conducted with the substantial support of local authorities. The only Nazi-occupied country in which there was a concerted effort by the local population to save its Jewish citizens was Denmark. In that country, despite the fact that it bordered Germany, out of a pre-war population of 8,000, only fifty-two Jews fell victim to the Nazi terror—that is, less than 1 percent.

The human cost of World War I and II is, according to the best estimates, between eighty and ninety million people. One must add to this the additional hundreds of millions who were, to some degree, physically injured or emotionally scarred by the two wars—those who lost parents, children, siblings and friends; who were displaced, forced to flee their homelands, and who lost irreplaceable and priceless links to their personal and cultural heritage. It is immensely difficult to articulate, let alone comprehend, the horrifying scale of the tragedy that occurred in the thirty-one years between 1914 and 1945. Please keep in mind that this massive tragedy occurred only a relatively short time ago. There are still tens of millions of people alive today who lived through the Second World War. And for people of my generation, the events of World War I occurred

during the lives of our grandparents—who were, in many cases, veterans of that war. World War I and World War II belong to very recent history. The world in which we live is the product of these twin catastrophes. The contradictions—political and economic—out of which these wars emerged have not been resolved. This historical fact alone is sufficient reason to see in the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II an opportunity for a reexamination of its origins, consequences and lessons.

Of course, within the space of a single lecture, it is possible only to provide a regrettably sparse outline of the principal causes of the war. For the purpose of clarity, but without unnecessary over-simplification, this outline will treat World War I and World War II as inextricably related episodes.

The origins of World War I

The speed with which the crisis unfolded in the summer of 1914 took many by surprise. Few suspected that the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 would lead, within only five weeks, to a full-scale European War. Nor did they foresee that it would assume global dimensions with the entry of the United States into the conflict in April 1917. The conditions for a disastrous military conflagration had been maturing during the previous fifteen years, and these conditions were bound up with dramatic changes in world economy and, consequently, world politics.

Prior to the eruption of 1914, there had been no generalized war between the “Great Powers” of Europe since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. The Congress of Vienna created a relatively stable framework of inter-state relations that was sustained for the rest of the century. This does not mean that the nineteenth century was peaceful. The nation-state system in its modern form emerged out of a series of significant military conflicts, of which the most bloody was the American Civil War. In Europe, the consolidation of the modern German state under the political hegemony of Prussia was achieved by Bismarck with the calculated use of military force against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and, finally, France (1870). Earlier, in the 1850s, the British and the French countered the geopolitical ambitions of the Russian Empire in the Crimean conflict. But these military conflicts were relatively contained, and did not lead to a breakdown of the entire framework of European and global politics.

However, by the 1890s the nature of world politics was changing under the impact of the massive expansion of capitalist finance and industry, particularly in Europe and North America, and the growing influence of global economic interests in the calculations of national states. The conflict between major capitalist states—or, to be more precise, the most powerful financial and industrial interests exercising vast influence over the formulation of foreign policy—for dominance within certain “spheres of influence” became the driving force of world politics. This development found its most brutal expression in the struggle for colonies, whose local populations were reduced to a semi-slave status.

The age of imperialism had dawned. It destabilized the equilibrium of global inter-state relations. In the decades that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had enjoyed a position of virtually unchallenged supremacy. Its empire, based on naval power and vast colonial possessions, was the dominant fact of international politics in the nineteenth century. As was commonly said of the British Empire, the sun never set and the wages never rose! France also enjoyed a privileged status in the world system as an old colonial power, but was considerably behind Britain. The emergence of new bourgeois national states, with rapidly expanding capitalist industry and finance, placed the existing

geopolitical relations under stress. The two most important “new” capitalist states, which were rapidly acquiring imperialist interests and appetites, were Germany and the United States.

The entry of the United States into the imperialist club occurred in 1898, when the McKinley administration, with unsurpassed cynicism, hypocrisy and dishonesty, concocted a pretext for war against Spain. Within just a few months, Cuba was turned into a semi-colony of the United States. At the same time, the United States, through the occupation of the Philippines, established the foundations for its imperialist domination of the Pacific. Having justified its occupation of the Philippines with the promise of freedom and democracy for its inhabitants, the United States honored its commitments by slaughtering 200,000 local insurgents who opposed American occupation. The United States was blessed with a precious geographical advantage: a continent that was protected from foreign meddling by two oceans. Most European powers were amazed by the crudeness of McKinley’s dishonest warmongering, but could do absolutely nothing about it.

The growing ambitions of Germany, on the other hand, immediately collided with its imperialist neighbors in Europe—France, Russia, and, above all, Britain. The expanding conflicts of powerful national capitalist states, seeking dominance within an increasingly integrated global economy, formed the real basis for the accumulation of geopolitical tensions that finally exploded in the summer of 1914.

During, and especially after, World War I, there was a great deal of discussion about “who started the war,” “who fired the first shot” and, “who was to blame.” These questions play a major role in the propaganda of the states involved in war, as their ruling cliques are anxious to absolve themselves of responsibility for the disastrous consequences of their pyromania.

Studied in isolation from broader historical circumstances, there is plenty of evidence that Germany and Austria-Hungary were principally responsible for the outbreak of war in August 1914. Their governments chose, with incredible recklessness, to exploit the assassination of Franz Ferdinand to achieve long-standing geopolitical objectives. They took decisions that set into motion the disastrous chain of events that led to the outbreak of hostilities. But beyond demonstrating the criminality of which capitalist regimes are capable—as we have seen more recently in Washington’s launching of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the basis of out-and-out lies—the evidence of German and Austrian premeditation is inadequate as an explanation for the deeper causes of the war.

It is true that France and Britain did not necessarily want war in August 1914. But that is not because they were devoted morally to peace. Britain, it should be remembered, had waged a brutal counter-insurgency war against the Boers in South Africa only a decade earlier. If Britain and France did not necessarily “want” war in 1914, it was because they were more or less satisfied with the geopolitical status quo that favored their global interests. However, when confronted with actions by Germany and Austria-Hungary that threatened the existing set-up and their interests, they accepted war as a political necessity. From the standpoint of the imperialist interests of France and Britain, war was preferable to a peace that changed the balance of power along lines sought by Germany.

In the final analysis, the cause of the war is not to be found in the actions of one or another state that precipitated the shooting, but in the nature of the imperialist system, in the struggle of powerful capitalist national states to maintain—or achieve, depending on the circumstances—a dominant position in an increasingly integrated global economic order.

In the years preceding the war, the international socialist movement had held a series of congresses in which it had warned of the deadly consequences of developing imperialism and the militarism it encouraged. The Second International, which had been founded in 1889, declared again and again its unrelenting opposition to capitalist militarism and pledged to mobilize the working class against war. It warned the European

ruling class that if war could not be stopped, the International would use the crisis created by war to hasten the overthrow of capitalism.

But in August 1914 these pledges were betrayed by virtually all the leaders of European socialism. On August 4, 1914, the German Social Democratic Party—the largest socialist party in the world—voted in the Reichstag for credits to finance the war. The same patriotic position was taken by socialist leaders in France, Austria and Britain. Only a handful of major socialist leaders took a clear and unequivocal stand against the war, among whom the most important were Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg.

Trotsky's analysis of the causes of World War I

I would like to focus briefly on the analysis made by Trotsky of the causes of the war. He rejected with contempt the deceitful and hypocritical claims of pro-war socialist leaders that they had sided with their capitalist rulers to defend their countries against foreign aggression. Trotsky exposed the blatant lies with which the warring governments sought to cover up the real political and economic motivations that underlay their decisions to go to war. He insisted that the cause of the war lay deeper, in changes in the structure of world economy and the very nature of the capitalist nation-state system.

Forced to leave Austria with the outbreak of the war, Trotsky first went to Zurich, where, in 1915, he wrote a brilliant pamphlet, *War and the International*, in which he explained the significance of the war.

The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit.

The nation must continue to exist as a cultural, ideologic and psychological fact, but its economic foundation has been pulled from under its feet. All talk of the present bloody clash being the work of national defence is either hypocrisy or blindness. On the contrary, the real, objective significance of the War is the breakdown of the present national economic centres, 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.

The War proclaims the downfall of the national state. Yet at the same time it proclaims the downfall of the capitalist system of economy. By means of the national state, capitalism has revolutionized the whole economic system of the world. It has divided the whole earth among the oligarchies of the great powers, around which were grouped the satellites, the small nations, who lived off the rivalry between the great ones. The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions but also against the capitalist economic organizations, which has now turned into barbarous

disorganization and chaos.

The War of 1914 is the most colossal breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions. ...

Capitalism has created the material conditions of a new Socialist economic system. Imperialism has led the capitalist nations into historic chaos. The War of 1914 shows the way out of this chaos by violently urging the proletariat on to the path of Revolution. [2]

This analysis was vindicated in the eruption of the Russian Revolution, which brought the Bolshevik party, led by Lenin and Trotsky, to power in October 1917.

After four years of unprecedented conflict and bloodshed, the war ended somewhat abruptly in November 1918. What brought the war to an end was related more to changing political conditions within the belligerent countries than to results on the battlefield. The October Revolution led rapidly to Russia's withdrawal from the war. The French army, staggered by soldiers' mutinies in 1917, came close to collapse. Only the infusion of American men and materiel on the side of the allies staved off military defeat and restored, at least to some extent, morale. Anti-war opposition grew rapidly in Germany, especially in the aftermath of the Bolshevik victory in Russia. In October 1918, a naval mutiny in Germany triggered broader revolutionary protests that led to the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Unable to continue the war, Germany sued for peace.

Despite the defeat of Germany, the war did not produce the results that Britain and France had originally envisioned. In the east, the war had led to socialist revolution in Russia and the radicalization of the working class throughout Europe. In the west, the war created the conditions for the emergence of the United States—which had suffered relatively few losses—as the dominant capitalist power.

The Versailles settlement of 1919 set the stage for the eruption of new conflicts. The vindictive terms insisted upon by French imperialism did little to ensure stable relations on the European continent. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire resulted in the creation of a new set of unstable national states, torn by sectional rivalries. The Versailles settlement failed to create a foundation for the restoration of the political and economic equilibrium of Europe. Rather, the world capitalist economy, as it emerged from the war, was riven by imbalances that led to the unprecedented collapse that began on Wall Street in October 1929.

The rise of US imperialism

Another major factor in the re-emergence of international tensions that was to lead to a renewal of global war in 1939 was the new role of the United States in world affairs. Wilson was hailed—in the aftermath of the US entry into World War I and the victory of socialist revolution in Russia—as the savior of capitalist Europe. But it soon became clear to the European bourgeoisie that the interests of the United States were in conflict with its own. The American bourgeoisie was not willing to accept European dominance in world affairs. It viewed the privileges enjoyed by Britain within the framework of its Empire as a barrier to the expansion of its own commercial interests.

While the steady expansion of American power gave British diplomats sleepless nights, it thoroughly unnerved the most ruthless representatives of German imperialism. In *Wages of Destruction*, a new study of the origins of World War II, the respected scholar Adam Tooze writes:

... America should provide the pivot for our understanding of the

Third Reich. In seeking to explain the urgency of Hitler's aggression, historians have underestimated his acute awareness of the threat posed to Germany, along with the rest of the European powers, by the emergence of the United States as the dominant global superpower. On the basis of contemporary economic trends, Hitler predicted already in the 1920s that the European powers had only a few more years to organize themselves against this inevitability. ...

The aggression of Hitler's regime can thus be rationalized as an intelligible response to the tensions stirred up by the uneven development of global capitalism, tensions that are of course still with us today. [3]

The years that followed the conclusion of World War I witnessed the heyday of pacifism. Wilson had proclaimed upon declaring war on Germany in 1917 that the United States was waging war "to end all wars." The League of Nations—which the US refused to join—was set up by the European victors. In 1927, France and the United States negotiated the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which declared war illegal. And yet, international tensions became increasingly acute, especially after the Wall Street collapse, the onset of the global depression, and the resulting political destabilization of Europe—of which the coming to power in Germany of Hitler's Nazi party in January 1933 was the most ominous expression.

No one grasped the implications of the unfolding crisis of world capitalism with greater foresight and clarity than Leon Trotsky. In June 1934, having been exiled from the Soviet Union by the reactionary bureaucratic regime led by Stalin, Trotsky wrote:

The same causes, inseparable from modern capitalism, that brought about the last imperialist war have now reached infinitely greater tension than in the middle of 1914. The fear of the consequences of a new war is the only factor that fetters the will of imperialism. But the efficacy of this brake is limited. The stress of the inner contradictions pushes one country after another on the road to fascism, which, in its turn, cannot maintain power except by preparing international explosions. All governments fear war. But none of the governments has any freedom of choice. Without a proletarian revolution, a new world war is inevitable. [4]

Trotsky explained, as he had in 1915, that the principal source of global tensions lay in the contradiction "between the productive forces and the framework of the national state, in conjunction with the principal contradiction—between the productive forces and the private ownership of the means of production..." [5] The defense of the national state served no politically or economically progressive function. "The national state with its borders, passports, monetary system, customs and the army for the protection of customs has become a frightful impediment to the economic and cultural development of humanity." [6]

With Hitler in power, liberal and reformist apologists for the imperialist bourgeoisie in Britain, France and the United States had begun to argue that a new war would be a fight against dictatorship. This argument would eventually be adopted by the Soviet Stalinist regime. Trotsky emphatically rejected this claim. "A modern war between the great powers," he wrote, "does not signify a conflict between democracy and fascism but a struggle of two imperialisms for the redivision of the world." [7]

Within the context of this political perspective, Trotsky analyzed the global ambitions of the United States:

U.S. capitalism is up against the same problems that pushed Germany in 1914 on the path of war. The world is divided? It must be redivided. For Germany it was a question of "organizing Europe." The United States must "organize" the world. History is bringing humanity face to face with the volcanic eruption of American imperialism. [8]

These words were to prove extraordinarily prescient. Trotsky insisted that only the revolutionary struggle of the working class, leading to the overthrow of capitalism, could prevent the eruption of a new world war, even bloodier than the first. But the defeats of the working class in Spain and France—the product of the combined treachery of the Stalinist, social democratic and reformist bureaucracies—made war inevitable. It finally began on September 1, 1939.

As in 1914, German imperialism was the principal instigator of the conflict. But the Second World War, like the first, had more profound causes. Trotsky wrote:

The democratic governments, who in their day hailed Hitler as a crusader against Bolshevism, now make him out to be some kind of Satan unexpectedly loosed from the depths of hell, who violates the sanctity of treaties, boundary lines, rules, and regulations. If it were not for Hitler the capitalist world would blossom like a garden. What a miserable lie! This German epileptic with a calculating machine in his skull and unlimited power in his hands did not fall from the sky or come up out of hell: he is nothing but the personification of all the destructive forces of imperialism. ... Hitler, rocking the old colonial powers to their foundations, does nothing but give a more finished expression to the imperialist will to power. Through Hitler, world capitalism, driven to desperation by its own impasse, has begun to press a razor-sharp dagger into its own bowels. [9]

Lest one think that Trotsky is here being unjust to the leaders of the wartime opponents of Hitler, it is worth recalling the words of Winston Churchill. In January 1927, sometime before he became British prime minister, Churchill visited Rome, met with the Italian dictator Mussolini, and wrote: "I could not help being charmed by Signor Mussolini's gentle and simple bearing, and by his calm, detached poise in spite of so many burdens and dangers." Italian fascism provided the "necessary antidote to the Russian virus." Churchill told the Italian fascists: "If I had been an Italian I am sure I should have been entirely with you from the beginning to the end of your victorious struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism." [10]

A historian of the period notes:

To many Conservatives, and business groups, Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, dedicated to impeding the spread of communism, were objects of some admiration. As a result, there was strong opposition—especially in Britain—to an alliance with the Soviet Union aimed against the fascist powers. [11]

The outbreak of World War II

Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and Britain and France

declared war on the Third Reich two days later. After Hitler completed the conquest of Poland within a few weeks, no further military action was taken by Nazi Germany until the spring of 1940, when German armies swept across Western Europe. In June 1940, France—whose ruling class was more concerned with the revolutionary threat posed by its own working class than with the danger of a Nazi takeover of the country—surrendered.

Stalin had hoped that he could avoid war with Germany through his cowardly and treacherous non-aggression pact. But the fascist regime had always viewed the destruction of the Soviet Union as the main component of its plan for domination in Europe. In June 1941, the German invasion of the USSR began. Despite Stalin's disastrous miscalculations and the massive defeats initially suffered by the Red Army, the Nazi forces encountered unyielding resistance.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war. Four days later, on December 11, 1941, Germany declared war on the United States, which immediately replied with a declaration of war on Germany. For the next three-and-a-half years, the war was waged with unrelenting ferocity—though it must be stressed that the war in Western Europe, at least until the Allied invasion in June 1944, was, in military terms, a relatively minor side show in comparison to the horrific carnage of the struggle between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The war in Europe finally came to an end on May 8, 1945, with the unconditional capitulation of Nazi Germany, just one week after Hitler's suicide.

The war in Asia continued for another three months, though there was never any doubt of its outcome. There had never existed even a remote possibility that Japan—with its much smaller population, underdeveloped industrial base, and limited access to key raw materials—could prevail against the United States. The Japanese government, as the United States government knew very well, was seeking, from the spring of 1945, acceptable terms for a surrender. But the tragedy was played out to the bloody end. In August 1945, the United States dropped two nuclear devices on the defenseless and militarily insignificant cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The death toll from the two bombs was approximately 150,000 people. As the American historian Gabriel Jackson later observed:

In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the conduct of different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy. [12]

Viewing World War I and World War II as interconnected stages in a single historical process, what can we conclude was the source and purpose of the conflict which cost approximately ninety million people their lives?

The eruption of the First World War arose out of inter-imperialist antagonisms generated by the emergence of powerful capitalist states that were dissatisfied with the existing geopolitical relations. Germany resented its inferior position in a world colonial system dominated by Britain and France, and chafed against the restraints placed on the pursuit of its interests by these powerful rivals. At the same time, the United States, whose unsurpassed economic power filled it with confidence and ambition, was unwilling to accept restrictions on the penetration of American capital into foreign markets, including those governed by the protective rules of the British Empire.

The conclusion of World War II brought to a conclusion a distinct period of global conflict that had begun with the dawn of the imperialist epoch in the late 1890s. Germany's bid for its "place in the sun" had suffered a decisive defeat. Similarly, Imperial Japan's dream of establishing its dominance in the Western Pacific, China and Southeast Asia was shattered by its decisive defeat in World War II. The British and the French emerged from the half-century of carnage desperately weakened, lacking sufficient financial resources to sustain their old empires. Whatever illusions they may have had about preserving their status as the premier imperialist powers were given their deathblow within a decade of the end of World War II.

In 1954, the French suffered a devastating military defeat in Dien Bien Phu at the hands of the Vietnamese liberation forces, which forced French withdrawal from Indochina. In 1956, the British government was forced by the United States to call off its invasion of Egypt—a public humiliation that confirmed Britain's subservience to American imperialism. As foreseen by Trotsky decades earlier, the struggle among the main imperialist powers for global dominance, the brutal redivision of the world that cost the lives of tens of millions of human beings, had ended with the victory of American imperialism.

The world that emerged in 1945 from the carnage of two wars was profoundly different from that which existed in 1914. Though the United States had replaced bankrupt Britain as the pre-eminent imperialist power, it could not re-create, in its own image, the old British Empire. The age of colonial empires, at least in the form they had previously existed, had passed.

In a historical fact pregnant with profound irony, Woodrow Wilson delivered his war message to Congress, in April 1917, just as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was making his way back to revolutionary Russia. Two great historical lines of development intersected at this critical juncture. Wilson's speech marked the decisive emergence of the United States as the dominant imperialist force on the planet. Lenin's arrival in Russia marked the beginning of a massive wave of socialist and mass anti-imperialist struggles that were to sweep across the globe.

By the time the United States achieved its victory over Germany and Japan in 1945, hundreds of millions of people were already in revolt against imperialist oppression. The task that confronted the United States was to stem the tide of global revolutionary struggle. It is not possible within the framework of this survey to provide even an outline of post-war developments. This would require at least some explanation of the political dynamics of the so-called "Cold War," which defined international politics between 1945 and 1991. However, in bringing this lecture to a conclusion, it is necessary to stress that the United States viewed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 as an opportunity to finally establish the unchallenged hegemony of American imperialism.

The US doctrine of "preventive war"

In 1992, the US military adopted a strategic doctrine that declared that it would not permit any country to emerge as a challenger to the dominant global position of the United States. In 2002, this expansive military doctrine was supplemented with the promulgation of the doctrine of "preventive war," which declared that the United States reserved the right to attack any country that it believed to pose a *potential* threat to its security. This new doctrine was directed specifically against China, which was warned against building up its own military forces.

It should be pointed out that the new US military doctrine is illegal from the standpoint of international law. The legal precedents established at the Nuremberg war crimes trials held that war is not a legitimate instrument

of state policy, and that preventive war is illegal. A military attack by one state upon another is legal only in the presence of a clear and immediate threat. In other words, military action is justified only as an inescapably urgent measure of national self-defense. The attack on Iraq, which followed by only a few months the promulgation of the 2002 doctrine of preventive war, was a war crime. Had the United States been held accountable under the precedents established at Nuremberg in 1946, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell and many others would have been placed on trial.

The critical question that flows inescapably from any examination of World War I and World War II is whether such catastrophes could ever happen again. Were the wars of the twentieth century some sort of horrifying aberration from a “normal” course of historical development? Is it possible to imagine the re-emergence of international disputes and antagonisms that would make the outbreak of World War III possible?

The answer to this question does not require far-fetched speculation. *The real question is less whether a new eruption of global warfare is possible, but how long do we have before such a catastrophe occurs? And, flowing from that second question, the next and most decisive question is whether anything can be done to stop it from happening.*

In weighing the risk of war, bear in mind that the United States has been engaged repeatedly in major military conflicts since 1990, when it first invaded Iraq. During the past decade, since 1999, it has waged major wars in the Balkans, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. In one way or another, all of these wars have been related to the effort to secure the dominant global position of the United States.

It is highly significant that the increasing use of military force by the United States takes place against the backdrop of its steadily deteriorating global economic position. The weaker the United States becomes from an economic standpoint, the more inclined it is to offset this weakness through the use of military force. There are, in this specific respect, disturbing parallels to the policies of the Nazi regime in the late 1930s.

Moreover, keeping in mind the 2002 Strategic Doctrine, the United States confronts an expanding array of powers whose economic and military development are viewed by State Department and Pentagon strategists as significant threats. As the balance of economic power shifts away from the United States to various global competitors—a process that has been accelerated by an economic crisis that erupted in 2008 and which continues to unfold—there is an ever greater temptation to employ military force to reverse the unfavorable economic trend.

Finally, if we recall that World Wars I and II arose out of the destabilization of the old imperialist order dominated by Britain and France as a result of the emergence of new competitors, it is not unlikely that the present international order—in which the dominant power, the United States, is already riven with internal crisis and hard-pressed to maintain global dominance—will break down beneath the pressure exerted by emerging powers (such as China, India, Russia, Brazil, the EU) which are dissatisfied with existing arrangements.

Add to that the growing intra-regional tensions that threaten at any moment to erupt into military confrontations that could trigger interventions from extra-regional forces and lead to a global conflagration. One need only recall the tense situation which arose in the summer of 2008 as a result of the conflict between Georgia and Russia.

Only socialist revolution can prevent World War III

The world is a powder keg. It is not necessarily the case that the ruling classes want war. But they are not necessarily able to stop it. As Trotsky wrote on the eve of World War II, the capitalist regimes toboggan to

disaster with their eyes closed. The insane logic of imperialism and the capitalist nation-state system, of the drive to secure access to markets, raw materials and cheap labor, of the relentless pursuit of profit and personal riches, leads inexorably in the direction of war.

What, then, can stop it? History shows us that the frightful mechanisms of imperialism can be jammed only by the active and conscious intervention of the masses of the world’s people—above all, the working class—into the historical process. There is no means of stopping imperialist war except through international socialist revolution.

In 1914, Lenin, opposing the betrayal of the Second International, declared that the imperialist epoch is the epoch of wars and revolution. That is, the global economic, social and political contradictions that gave rise to imperialist war also create the objective foundations for international socialist revolution. In this sense, imperialist war and world socialist revolution are the responses of different and opposed social classes to the historical impasse of capitalism. The correctness of Lenin’s assessment of the world situation was confirmed with the eruption of revolution in Russia in 1917.

For all the changes that have occurred since the beginning of World War I ninety-five years ago and World War II seventy years ago, we still live in the imperialist epoch. Thus, the great questions that confront mankind today are: Will the development of political consciousness in the international working class counteract the accumulating destructive tendencies of imperialism? Will the working class develop sufficient political consciousness in time, before capitalism and the imperialist nation-state system lead mankind into the abyss?

These are not questions merely for academic consideration. The very posing of these questions demands an active response. The answers will be provided not in a classroom, but in the real conflict of social forces. Struggle will decide the matter. And the outcome of this struggle will be influenced, to a decisive degree, by the development of revolutionary, that is, socialist consciousness. The struggle against imperialist war finds its highest expression in the fight to develop a new political leadership of the working class.

Only a few months after the outbreak of World War II—a catastrophe made possible by the betrayals of the reactionary Stalinist, social democratic and reformist labor bureaucracies—Trotsky, the supreme political realist, wrote:

The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings. A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective. History will provide it with enough opportunities and possibilities to test itself, to accumulate experience, and to mature. The swifter the ranks of the vanguard are fused the more the epoch of bloody convulsions will be shortened, the less destruction will our planet suffer. But the great historical problem will not be solved in any case until a revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat. The question of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: it is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organizing the proletarian vanguard with tenfold energy. Precisely in this lies the task of the Fourth International. [13]

This analysis, written at an earlier stage of global imperialist crisis, resonates in the existing situation. The very survival of human civilization is at stake. It is, above all, the responsibility of the youth to stop the drive

toward war and secure the future of mankind. This is why I must conclude this lecture by appealing to you to join the Socialist Equality Party and contribute to the building of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

Notes:

[1] Exact casualty figures are not available. The totals differ slightly from source to source. The numbers in the tables are drawn from Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties] and other books and web sites.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *The War and the International 1915*, (Colombo: A Young Socialist Publication, 1971), pp. vii–viii.

[3] Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. xxiv–xxv.

[4] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933–34* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 300.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 307.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 302.

[9] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–40* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p. 233.

[10] Cited in Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 16.

[11] Frank McDonough, *Hitler, Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 33.

[12] Gabriel Jackson, *Civilization and Barbarity in Twentieth Century Europe* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), pp. 176–177.

[13] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–40*, pp. 260–261.



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