

140 years since the Berlin Congress: The new Scramble for Africa—Part Two

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The new epoch of imperialist barbarism

For the African masses, the scramble was a new stage of barbarism. For several centuries, the slave trade had formed a key part of the development of capitalism in Europe and America, while under-developing Africa. It deprived the continent of millions of able-bodied people, displaced millions more as they fled the hideous commercial practice, and fomented predatory wars that disrupted its economy. It is estimated that 18.5 million Africans were sold as slaves and sent to the Americas, the Mediterranean littoral or the Arabian Peninsula. As Karl Marx described it in *Capital* (1867): “the commercial hunting of blackskins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”^[1]

After the Berlin Conference, Africans were artificially thrown together within colonially defined territories or divided by externally drawn borders. The sovereignty of centralised and non-centralised polities was either abolished outright or manipulated for indirect imperialist rule. It is estimated that 10,000 communities were thrown into 40 colonial territories.

Tribal identities, once relatively fluid, became rigidly defined and entrenched. European colonial powers classified and codified Africans into specific groups, often aligned with territorially demarcated administrative units or based on pre-existing prejudices, which portrayed some tribes as more warrior-like, others as smarter and more capable of serving indirect rule, or as more business-oriented, hardworking, or lazy.

Economically, reliance on primary commodity exports and imported manufactured goods stifled diversification, embedding a dependency that shaped colonial economies for decades.

The partitioning of Africa, the fomenting of tribal divisions, and the establishment of exploitative colonial economies had devastating consequences for the post-independence states that emerged after the Second World War. Dominated by bourgeois nationalist forces, these newly independent economies remained subordinate to and dependent on imperialist nations for investment, technology, and access to global markets. Meanwhile, the divisive tribal dynamics engineered by colonial powers were perpetuated by African ruling elites, further entrenching social divisions and undermining the unity of workers and the rural masses.

The “white man’s burden” motive was soon nakedly exposed. Extracting profits was the overriding aim, as imperialist politicians like Joseph Chamberlain in Britain and Jules Ferry in France admitted proudly. As one Belgian governor said from Congo, “As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, ‘To gather rubber in the district...

one must cut off hands, noses and ears’.”^[2] Millions would perish to fuel the conveyor belt of raw materials, agricultural and mineral, that were sent to Europe to generate profits.

Contrary to the colonial narrative claiming that most tribes quickly accepted European rule, mass resistance erupted. In what is now Kenya, the Nandi successfully waged a 10-year guerrilla war against the British, which significantly disrupted the construction of the Uganda Railway and British control in the region before its leader, Koitalel, was assassinated during a bogus peace meeting. In Ethiopia, Emperor Menelik issued a mobilisation order against the Italian invasion and successfully stemmed Italian imperialism until Mussolini’s fascist invasion in 1936. In Tanzania, the Ngoni, Matumbi, and Zaramo people launched the Maji Maji Rebellion (1905-1907), and in West Africa, the Ashanti Empire fought British colonisation in what is now Ghana. Thousands of Egyptians, Sudanese and Somali lost their lives in battles and skirmishes against European forces.

But the backwardness, economic and social, of these regions meant no effective resistance could be offered. Africans were soon overpowered by the superior combined forces of the European imperialists and their local proxies. Spears and arrows were no match for modern European weaponry. For those communities that had acquired muskets, there were totally outmoded compared to the new maxim gun which had 10 times the rate of fire at six times charge.

The impossibility of effective resistance on the part of African societies did not result, however, just from military factors. Tribal society meant that small, scattered and diverse units and kingdoms lacked all possibility for continued resistance, let alone the revolutionary overthrow of imperialism.

Resistance was met with extreme forms of brutality. German imperialism carried out its first genocide, against the Herero people in today’s Namibia, killing 80 percent of the population, many driven to the desert to starve to death. To enforce quotas and maintain the control needed to impose forced labour, particularly in rubber and ivory extraction, Belgian imperialism imposed a notorious practice in Congo involving cutting off the hands and ears of workers who didn’t meet the quotas. The British pioneered the use of concentration camps against the Dutch Boer guerrillas in South Africa, a war that unfolded at the expense of the African population.

The international socialist movement and the struggle against war

The development of the revolutionary socialist movement was inseparably bound up with the struggle against imperialism. The finest representatives of the Second International, founded in 1889, warned that imperialism was leading to war which could only be averted by the

revolutionary struggle of the working class. A notable excerpt from its Stuttgart Congress of 1907 stated:

Wars are the outcome of the competitive struggle of capitalist nations for world markets, for the expansion of capitalist domination in foreign countries. The working class, which suffers most severely from these wars, has no interest in supporting them but must instead oppose them with all its strength.

This resolution underscored the responsibility of socialists to “[u]se the economic and political crises created by war to hasten the overthrow of capitalist class rule and the establishment of socialism.”^[3] The Congress called on workers of all countries to reject patriotism and stand united against imperialism, militarism, and colonial exploitation.

But the political content of these resolutions was undermined by the steady growth of opportunism within the parties of the Second International, rooted in the “workers’ aristocracy” that had benefited from the crumbs of imperialism and who increasingly identified their interests, in peacetime and at war, with the economic and political successes of their “own” imperialism.

In violation of their declared policies, when war erupted in August 1914, the main parties of the Second International voted in their respective parliaments to support the demand for war credits. This marked the collapse of the Second International.

Only a relative handful of socialist leaders opposed the capitulation of the opportunists to the wave of imperialist chauvinism. The most farsighted of these revolutionary internationalists, like Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, intervened to politically rearm the working class. In their major works, they insisted that war had arisen from the mounting contradictions of capitalism. The eruption of the war was a violent expression of the fact that the progressive epoch of capitalist development and the nation state system was over. The only alternative was socialist revolution.

Luxemburg stated powerfully in her famous *Junius Pamphlet* on “The Crisis of German Social Democracy”:

The world war is a turning point. For the first time, the ravaging beasts set loose upon all quarters of the globe by capitalist Europe have broken into Europe itself. A cry of horror went through the world when Belgium, that precious jewel of European civilization, and when the most august cultural monuments of northern France fell into shards under the impact of the blind forces of destruction. This same “civilized world” looked on passively as the same imperialism ordained the cruel destruction of ten thousand Herero tribesmen and filled the sands of the Kalahari with the mad shrieks and death rattles of men dying of thirst... as in Tripoli where fire and sword bowed the Arabs beneath the yoke of capitalism, destroyed their culture and habitations. Only today has this “civilized world” become aware that the bite of the imperialist beast brings death, that its very breath is infamy.^[4]

In opposition to the capitulation of the Second International, the Bolshevik Party that would take power in Russia in 1917 under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky came out against the war. Twenty days after its outbreak, Lenin authored a resolution that defined the conflict as “a bourgeois, imperialist and dynastic war.”

The resolution declared the SPD “a party which has voted for war credits and repeated the bourgeois-chauvinist phrases of the Prussian

Junkers and the bourgeoisie.” This was a “sheer betrayal of socialism. Under no circumstances can the conduct of the leaders of the German Social-Democratic Party be condoned, even if we assume that the party was absolutely weak and had temporarily to bow to the will of the bourgeois majority of the nation. This party has in fact adopted a national-liberal policy.”^[5]

There followed a sharp reckoning with the rightwing majority of the SPD and Karl Kautsky, the representative of the “Marxist Centre” within the SPD. At the heart of the conflict between Lenin and Kautsky were their opposed assessments of the future of capitalism as a social system and the objective historical necessity for socialist revolution. For Lenin, the necessity for international socialist revolution flowed from the conclusion that the eruption of imperialist war represented the opening of an historic crisis of the capitalist system, which, despite truces and even peace settlements, could not be overcome.

Lenin insisted that the economic processes which lay at the heart of the imperialist epoch—the transformation from the competitive capitalism of the 19th century to the monopoly capitalism of the 20th—had created the objective foundations for the development of an international socialist economy.

Kautsky’s perspective was diametrically opposed. Seeking to obscure the objective causes of imperialist wars and their revolutionary implications for developing an anti-war strategy, Kautsky posited on the very eve of the First World War that “the growing international interweaving between the various cliques of finance capital” could lead to “a new, ultra-imperialist policy.” This new stage would “replace the mutual rivalries of national finance capital with the joint exploitation of the world by internationally united finance capital.”^[6]

In his reply to Kautsky, Lenin insisted that agreements between imperialist powers could never be permanent. One imperialist coalition against another or a “general alliance embracing all the imperialist powers” are “inevitably nothing more than a ‘truce’ in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars; the one conditions the other, producing alternating forms of peaceful and non-peaceful struggle on one and the same basis of imperialist connections and relations within world economics and world politics.”^[7]

Trotsky drew another fundamental conclusion on the war: the socialist movement could not maintain a revolutionary orientation within the framework of the nation state. This was the reason for the collapse of the Second International. He insisted, “In their historic crash the national states have pulled down with them the national Socialist parties also... As the national states have become a hindrance to the development of the forces of production, so the old Socialist parties have become the main hindrance to the revolutionary movement of the working class.”^[8]

For all the developments in the global economy over the past century since the First World War, Lenin and Trotsky’s analysis of both the economic and political characteristics of imperialism retains immense contemporary relevance. The same conflicts—over markets, sources of raw materials, and access to cheap labour—that led to the First and Second World Wars are leading relentlessly to the Third.

To be continued

Karl Marx, “Capital: Volume One” (1867). Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm>.

Adam Hochschild, ‘Belgium’s imperialist rape of Africa King Leopold’s Ghost—A story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa’ (Macmillan, 1998), p. 165.

International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, August 18–24, 1907 Vorwärts Publishers, Berlin, 1907, pp. 64–66.

Rosa Luxemburg, “The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy” (1915). Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/ch08.htm>.

Vladimir Lenin, “The Tasks of Revolutionary Social-Democracy in the European War” (1914). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/aug/x01.htm>.

Cited in Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International” (1915). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/iv.htm>.

Vladimir Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” (1916). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch09.htm>.

Leon Trotsky, “War and the International” (Young Socialist Publications, 1971), pp. xii-xiii.

[1] Karl Marx, “Capital: Volume One” (1867). Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm>.

[2] Adam Hochschild, 'Belgium's imperialist rape of Africa King Leopold's Ghost—A story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa' (Macmillan, 1998), p. 165.

[3] International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, August 18–24, 1907 Vorwärts Publishers, Berlin, 1907, pp. 64-66.

[4] Rosa Luxemburg, “The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy” (1915). Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/ch08.htm>.

[5] Vladimir Lenin, “The Tasks of Revolutionary Social-Democracy in the European War” (1914). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/aug/x01.htm>.

[6] Cited in Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International” (1915). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/iv.htm>.

[7] Vladimir Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” (1916). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch09.htm>.

[8] Leon Trotsky, “War and the International” (Young Socialist Publications, 1971), pp. xii-xiii.



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