
American Socialists and the War.

by Morris Hillquit

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Socialists Opposed to War.

The systematic campaign of misrepresentation waged against the Socialist Party by the capitalist press with the helpful cooperation of a group of "patriotic" Socialist intellectuals was bound to create a certain confusion in the minds of many about the attitude of the Socialist Party towards the war.

From the day of the first declaration of war in Europe to the day of this writing the Socialist Party has been determined and emphatic in its opposition. It preserved an attitude of strict neutrality towards the belligerent powers before our entrance in the war. It protested vigorously on every occasion when our country seemed in danger of becoming involved in the conflict. It was the only political party and the only important organized force in America to maintain an active opposition after our country had been drawn into the world carnival of slaughter. Before and after our entrance in the war alike, the Socialist Party advocated an immediate and gen-

eral peace. At all times it has endeavored to reunite the Socialist International and to revive it as a factor for lasting peace within and among the nations of the world.

The Socialist opposition to war is based not



merely on humanitarian grounds, potent and compelling as these are, but principally on the deep-rooted conviction that modern wars are at the bottom sanguinary struggles for the commercial advantages of the possessing classes, and that they are disastrous to the cause of the workers, their struggles and aspirations, their rights and liberties.

This attitude need not necessarily imply an equal condemnation of all warring governments or of all methods of warfare or an indifference to the outcome of the war and to the terms upon which peace will be concluded.

All Countries at Fault.

Socialists may well recognized that Germany was primarily responsible for the immediate outbreak of this war; that her conduct of the war has

been unusually ruthless, and that a decisive victory of German arms would be harmful to human civilization and social progress. But Socialists refuse to accept the naive theory that the great world catastrophe is due solely or even primarily to the sheer love of mischief on the part of an unruly nation, and that the future of mankind would be made safe by punishment of the culprit. The solemn assertion that Germany is the "swashbuckler of Europe" and must be spanked, may satisfy the simple minds of English statesmen and American newspaper editors. To Socialists accustomed to look to substantial motives back of great historical events, the explanation is singularly inadequate, and the remedy ludicrously inefficient.

Modern penology has long discarded the crude notion that crime is caused by willful individual perversity and that punishment is either a corrective for the criminal or a deterrent for the would-be criminal. Enlightened penologists are unanimous in the conviction that crime is mostly the product of unjust and unhealthy social conditions and environment, and that a radical and permanent cure of crime can only be achieved in the improvement and correction of those conditions.

The Socialists hold that this obvious truth applies to nations in even a larger measure than to individuals. No nation is inherently vicious, but the irrational and inhuman condition of modern "civilization" are bound to force them all into vicious and savage conduct from time to time.

The contemporaneous social order is based upon the principle of general, indiscriminate, and unremitting struggle for life, wealth, and power. The struggle is waged within each nation and between the nations, and before the outbreak of the war it had reached an acute and critical stage. The ruling classes of each leading country, the powers of money, industry, and trade, were reaching out for the commercial control of the world, and their respective interests and ambitions were sharply clashing with each other. The governments of the

nations were in all cases primarily the agencies of the capitalistic interests. The commercial quarrels of the latter reflected themselves in the diplomatic intrigues of the former.

Commercial Imperialism.

The policy of imperialism necessitated secret treaties and alliances and active preparations for war. Hence the stupendous militarist regime of Germany, which, be it remembered, was pretty nearly equalled by that of Russia and France, and vastly exceeded by the "navalist" regime of England. The war was thus systematically prepared and organized by the governments of the great European nations in the course of many years. It was due about 1914. Somebody had to begin it. It happened to be the government of Germany that took the odium of the initiative. The Imperial German government may be the immediate criminal in the world tragedy, but the governments of all other great European powers are accessories before the fact, and back of all of them and damning all of them lies the compelling motive for the crime — the greed of international capitalist competition.

Every great national or international iniquity has ever been clothed by its apologists in the iridescent garb of lofty idealism, and so this war is presented to us as a fight for democracy and justice. No doubt many of our ardent war apostles are entirely sincere in their professions. No doubt the bulk of the emotional masses unquestioningly accept this idealistic theory. But this cannot blind us to the fact that the war is essentially commercial in its origin, and that it is largely waged for material gain, at least in so far as the governments of some of the leading belligerent countries are concerned. It is this fundamental conception which largely determines the Socialist opposition to the war and the Socialist program of peace.

Reparation Impossible.

American Socialists have little patience with proposed peace terms based upon a desire to “repair the wrongs” of this war. The wrongs of the war are irreparable. No power on earth can recall to life the millions of young men, mostly workers, who have been slain on the dread battlefields of Europe, or restore to health the millions of maimed, crippled, and disfigured human beings. No amount of territory or gold will atone for the bottomless havoc inflicted by this war, for the moral and spiritual ruin it has wrought. A peace built on the principle of “reparation” would leave all the active factors and causes of war in full and fatal operation. It would be nothing but a patched-up truce, a prelude to new wars. The Socialists strive above everything for a peace that will offer guarantees of permanence, a peace convention that will eliminate the danger of future wars. They believe that such peace terms are quite possible even today before the competitive system of capitalism, the most direct cause of modern wars, is abolished.

Permanent Peace a Socialist Peace.

To this end the governments must first of all be divorced from the capitalist interests, and become true mouthpieces of the people. “The world must be made safe for democracy;” not democracy in form and name alone, as so many modern capitalist republics are, but democracy in fact as prevails in Russia at this time. This one fundamental basis of peace can not be incorporated in a formal peace convention or brought about by victory on the battlefield. It can only be forced by the people of each country upon their own government, and the organization of the people of all countries for that step is the special task of the international Socialist movement. The other indispensable conditions, which may and should be

incorporated in the peace compact are these:

1) Disarmament. The nations must disarm, immediately and completely. There can be no lasting peace so long as armies and navies are held in constant readiness for war. There can be no wars so long as there are no armies and navies to fight them.

2) Freedom of Seas and Trade. The world and its highways must be made free for international intercourse and trade.

3) Self-Government. Each nation must be given the right of complete political self-government without interference by any other nation.

4) International Cooperation. All nations, large and small, must form a union for peaceful cooperation in the work of advancing international progress and for the rational and peaceful adjustment of disputes.

When these basic and vital conditions have been achieved the question of adjusting the immediate differences between the nations at war assumes a secondary importance. The main object of the terms of immediate settlement must be to reconcile the hostile nations and to prepare them for friendly collaboration. That is presumably what the President of the United States had in mind when less than half a year ago he announced to the unanimous acclaim of all forward-looking men and women of this country “that it must be a peace without victory. * * * Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor’s terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.”

This is also the true and deep meaning of the terse slogan of the Russian revolution: “No annexation, no indemnities.”

Is such a peace program feasible and practical or is it merely the utopia of the dreamer?

A People's Peace Without Victory.

That depends. If peace is to come through the victory of arms and its terms are to be dictated by the governments through the conventional methods of diplomacy, the formula of perpetual peace without humiliation or spoilation will remain a mere dream, but if peace is to be brought about by the workers, those of Germany as well as the other belligerent countries, it will become a reality in fact as it is already a reality in the official policy of the Russian republic.

As the fatal war progresses it becomes daily more evident that the sinister forces of social strife and disorder which the rule of capitalism has conjured up are stronger than the conscious will of the ruling classes and the governments themselves. Just as the rulers of the nations have been unable to prevent the outbreak of war, so are they now impotent to terminate the conflict. The hope of the world rests upon the people of the world, and in the first instance upon the Socialists of all countries.

Socialism Triumphant.

The international Socialist movement, which in August 1914 was overwhelmed by the suddenness and violence of the world catastrophe, is beginning to recover. In every country at war, including Germany and Austria, the Socialist opposition to the war is growing daily. If the Socialist International has proved too weak to prevent war, the indications are that it will eventually become a compelling power for the restoration of peace. Of all the forces that operated in modern society before the war Socialism alone promises to emerge from the abyss chastened and strengthened, victorious and triumphant. It will forever be to the credit of the Socialist Party of America that during the period of acutest crisis in the life of international Socialism, it has not failed or wavered, but has stood loyally and courageously by the working class and upheld the true ultimate interests of human civilization in the face of attacks, persecution, and desertion.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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