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Our history

# The Second International and the First World War – Responding to capitalist global disaster: 1914 and today

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On this day one hundred years ago, a Bosnian nationalist assassinated the crown prince of Austria-Hungary, setting in motion a chain of events that led a month later to the outbreak of the First World War. The war shattered the world socialist movement and unleashed an overwhelming social catastrophe in Europe, killing seventeen million soldiers and civilians. The resulting revolutionary struggles brought the war to an abrupt end in 1918, while toppling the continent’s three great empires and bringing workers and peasants to power in Russia. The war also contributed to a global rise of anti-colonial struggles.

What does this unique cataclysm mean for us today? It is useful to compare World War 1 with the dangers posed today by climate change and environmental collapse.

The world is still ruled by arrogant imperial powers, which wage and threaten wars in many continents. Still, these powers do not seem to be on the verge of hurling themselves at each other in a global war as they did in 1914. Meanwhile, the colonial empires have given way to new forms of domination. We face a looming environmental disaster, but it will mature over decades, not weeks. The socialist movement is far weaker and less militant than in 1914. The road to socialism now seems more extended than it did at that time.

Yet many aspects of the socialist response to the First World War have resonance in our time. It is particularly helpful in defining the socialist response to climate change and in clarifying some disputed issues in this arena.

## Campaign against war

Let us begin with socialists’ response to the approach of world war and its outbreak in 1914. [1] All socialists contended that war was an evil endemic to capitalism, one that could be banished only through its overthrow. But in the previous century, socialists had viewed some wars as legitimate acts of national liberation or national defense. That is the framework in which Marx and Engels analyzed the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71. With the dawn of the age of imperialism, this approach had to be modified. Marx and Engels’ continuators now denied that wars among the Europe’s imperialist powers could be justified on grounds of national defense.

All socialists agreed that the war danger was now strategically central to the world socialist movement. Militarism and imperialism had popular support, which was all the more reason to oppose them frontally. The Socialist International identified the danger of world war at its 1891 congress and campaigned against it with increasing vigor. Later, the movement divided into reform-oriented and revolutionary wings, but it was still united in opposing imperialist war and colonial subjugation. In 1900, a world socialist congress in Paris resolved to combat militarism and colonialism, oppose military expenditure, and build a protest movement against the war threat.

## The 1907 Stuttgart congress

A decisive debate on socialists' response to war took place at the Socialist International congress in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1907. Delegates agreed that the danger of war was growing due to economic rivalries inherent in modern capitalism, and that socialists should rally the working class against this threat. They disagreed, however, on what to do if war seemed imminent. Four resolutions were presented, three from the French party, and one from Germany.

• The most authoritative French socialist leader, Jean Jaurès, called for workers to respond to imminent danger of war with a general strike.

• Gustave Hervé, known in the French party for his extreme leftist views, upped the ante: he favored a general strike plus an insurrection.

• Another French leader, Jules Guesde, represented a sometimes rigid Marxist alternative to the often reformist views of Jaurès. He opposed such special measures, holding that “the best means against militarism” was simply “the organization of workers of the entire world for socialism.”

• August Bebel, speaking for the German party's executive committee, stated that workers should do all possible to avert war and, if it broke out regardless, “intervene for its rapid termination.” But Bebel said it was impossible to specify in advance what measures workers should take. [2]

The resulting debate polarized delegates from France and Germany around the positions of Jaurès and Bebel, respectively – a dangerous dynamic reflecting tensions between these two capitalist states. The threat of deadlock was broken, however, by an initiative of a small group of revolutionary delegates led by Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin.

## Revolutionary course

Together with Julius Martov, they introduced an amendment to Bebel's resolution that conceded his point regarding the need for flexibility in the measures to be taken. Workers “must employ the means they consider most effective, which naturally vary according to the sharpening of the class struggle and the general political situation,” the amendment stated. It then added a passage that was to become the banner of revolutionary socialists in the run-up to the war and during its course:

“In case war should break out anyway, it is their duty to intervene for its speedy termination and to strive with all their power to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of class rule.” [3]

Through a process of negotiation, the German and French leaders were won to support the amendment, and the resulting resolution was adopted unanimously, with ardent enthusiasm. Even Hervé, eager as always to go one extra step, climbed on a table and raised both his arms to signal agreement. [4]

The amendment's text had been edited by the German party's lawyers to avoid any suggestion of subversion, but its revolutionary implications were evident. [5] Luxemburg's speech to the congress was also carefully worded, yet clear. Referring to the fulsome praise of the worker-peasant uprising in Russia in 1905 by delegates of many viewpoints, she said: “We give you back your homage, but learn from us.... The Russian revolution ... did not merely result from the Russo-Japanese War; it has also served to put an end to it.” [6]

The Stuttgart congress, in short, had made an unmistakable threat to respond to war with workers' revolution. This should not be misunderstood. For many of the International's leaders, the goal of the Stuttgart resolution was not to bring about revolution but to prevent the outbreak of a war that could trigger revolution as one of its attendant disasters. [7] The resolution was clear, but the delegates had conflicting and often unstated motivations.

Writing nine years after the Stuttgart congress, Bolshevik leader Gregory Zinoviev noted that at Stuttgart, and again at the Socialist International's 1912 conference in Basel, there was not "the slightest suggestion that the Socialists of even one of the countries that will be dragged into the war will have to 'defend the fatherland'.... Not a word, not a murmur of this!" But the Second International's weakness, he stated, "lay in its failure to say clearly and precisely that ... in the epoch of imperialism the concept of 'defense of the fatherland' does not apply to imperialist war." [8]

Nonetheless, the Stuttgart resolution had several distinctive strengths, which defined socialist response during the war.

â€¢ Socialists did not wait until the danger of world war exploded in their face. They acted as soon as the danger was apparent.

â€¢ Socialists did not rely on persuading imperialism to take the sensible course. They worked to build an independent mass movement.

â€¢ Socialists did not try to set the date for insurrection. They resolved to pursue the struggle however long was necessary.

â€¢ Socialists did not merely seek peace. They aimed to utilize the war crisis to put an end to capitalism, the true cause of war.

## Anti-colonialism

During this period, the international socialist movement consisted principally of parties in Europe and the European settler nations in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. The rest of the world was made up mainly of colonies, like British India or Indonesia, or semi-colonies – nominally independent countries under imperialist domination – like China or Iran. From its foundation in 1889, the Socialist International was critical of colonialism, but some of its leaders held out hope for a reformed or socialist colonial policy. The 1904 world congress was ambiguous on this point.

At the next congress, in Stuttgart, leaders supporting colonialism came very close to winning a majority. In the commission on colonialism, an amendment was adopted to the effect that under socialism, colonialism could be a force for civilization. Eduard David, a leader of the German Socialist party, was more blunt: "Europe needs colonies," he said. "It does not have enough of them. Without them, we would be economically like China." However, a minority draft flatly opposed every form of colonialism. [9]

In the discussion, racist views were on full display. Hendrick Van Kol, until then the International's most prominent spokesman on colonial issues, ridiculed the idea of approaching colonial subjects in friendship. "Suppose we bring a machine to the savages of central Africa," he said. "What will they do with it? Perhaps they will start up a war dance around it. (Loud laughter) ... Perhaps they will kill us or even eat us...." And a good deal more in that vein. [10]

The congress defeated the pro-colonial motion by a narrow margin, 128 votes to 108. In Lenin's view, the closeness of the vote reflected the fact that colonizing countries were sustained not merely by the labour of proletarians within their borders but by that of "enslaved natives in the colonies." This provides a material basis "for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism," he wrote. [11]

In the years that followed, the revolutionary wing of socialism continued to hammer on the need to oppose colonialism in every form and support colonial liberation struggles. Lenin's 1913 article, "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia," pointed to colonial peoples as a vanguard force in the global struggle for socialism. "Everywhere in Asia ... hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light, and freedom," while "advanced" Europe is "plundering China and helping the foes of democracy," he wrote. [12]

The congress also stated that peoples of colour should be able to immigrate into the countries of advanced capitalism with full and equal civil rights. [13]

A further point must therefore be added to the principles of Stuttgart:

â€¢ The struggle against war is a global question, embracing the cause of freedom for colonized peoples.

## Outbreak of war

The Stuttgart position was confirmed by international congresses in 1910 and 1912. In 1913, however, Rosa Luxemburg – alarmed by the German party's support for a graduated income tax for war expenditure – predicted that, if war was to break out, the party would approve war credits.

That is indeed what happened a year later – one hundred years ago this August – causing a definitive split in the socialist movement. The Socialist parties in the main warring countries – Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Belgium, Britain – betrayed their pledges in Stuttgart and rallied to support the war effort of their capitalist governments. Only in Russia and Serbia did the Socialist deputies oppose war credits. [14]

This betrayal occurred in the context of mass enthusiasm for the war, which influenced part of the working class in these countries. It even seemed to some that the moral goal of socialism had been achieved: all classes seemed to be as one in comradeship for the cause of the nation.

The German Socialist leader Max König recounted how he was accosted in a railway station by a group of soldiers who said, "König, you're going to Berlin, to parliament; think of us there: see to it that we have all we need; don't be stingy in voting money."

Another German Socialist, Konrad Haenisch, later recalled the rapturous moment of his conversion: "Such a driving, burning desire to throw yourself into that powerful current, the universal tide of national feeling... [the] longing to surrender yourself fully to that feeling that roared and raged about you and which had long since taken possession of your soul." [15]

By supporting the war, the Socialist movement retained its legality and its structures, but its spirit was shattered, and only a tiny handful stood loyal to its principles.

â€¢ There's a lesson here in standing firm even when that means social isolation.

## The Zimmerwald conference

Before the war was a year old, the handful of Socialists loyal to the Stuttgart decisions organized internationally to build a movement against the war. The Socialist Women's Movement acted first, on Clara Zetkin's initiative, holding a conference in Bern, Switzerland, in March 1915 that proclaimed, "Only the united determination of the people can stop the slaughter.... Down with capitalism.... Down with the war! Onward to socialism!" [16]

The following month, revolutionary youth of Switzerland, Italy, and Stuttgart, Germany, held a similar conference in the same city. Youth leagues in nine countries, with tens of thousands of members, were represented.

The celebrated Zimmerwald antiwar conference, which also brought together socialists from nine countries, took place in September 1915. Its manifesto called on workers to fight for peace, without annexations or indemnities. The struggle for peace is also a struggle for freedom, reconciliation of peoples, and socialism, it said. [17]

The Zimmerwald manifesto, drafted mostly by Leon Trotsky, circulated illegally in the warring countries and became a banner for revolutionary workers. There was a minority at Zimmerwald, however, led by the Bolsheviks and known as the Zimmerwald Left, which considered this response to be inadequate. This left current insisted on the need to struggle not just for peace but for the overthrow of capitalism, and it called for a clear political break with the "social patriots" who were supporting their rulers in the war. Trotsky countered that the Left was wrong in failing to take up the call for peace, which he termed "the immediate central cry of the proletariat, mobilizing it against militarism and chauvinism." Trotsky also criticized Lenin's view that in this imperialist war, socialists should favor the defeat of their own ruling class. [18]

Within three years, the slogans of Zimmerwald were being voiced up by millions of workers and soldiers across Europe. In 1917 and 1918, revolutions took place in Russia, Germany, and some neighboring countries. Communist parties were formed, encompassing both the Zimmerwald Left forces and a wide range of other socialist leaders, including Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Karl Liebknecht, and Christian Rakovsky. [19]

## World war and global warming

How does the World War experience relate to our reality 100 years later? As previously noted, global capitalism is vastly different today and does not seem to be on the edge either of economic collapse or a nuclear conflagration. However, capitalism's economic difficulties and the rivalries among capitalist powers have been powerful enough to have restrained capitalist rulers from making even a pretense of action to bring environmental problems under control. Meanwhile, the climate change generated by carbon emissions is undermining the livelihood and security of increasing numbers in poor countries and has become, in itself, a significant cause of war.

On capitalism's present course, climate change and related challenges will within a few decades cause a disaster dwarfing that of the First World War. Global warming, if left unchecked, will cause immense human loss and will become the overriding challenge to human society, just as did the world war a century ago.

That is not to say that the danger of war has receded. Indeed climate change provokes capitalist governments into

brutal efforts to exclude climate refugees and a scramble for diminishing resources. The pressure of climate change aggravates conflicts over mining, oil and gas extraction, possession of agricultural land, and Indigenous rights. All of these factors increase the danger of war, which, in turn, worsens the climate change crisis. The world is already experiencing wars brought on, in part, by climate change.

This experience is unlike that of the First World War in several profound ways.

â€¢ Basic facts are contested. No one can understand climate change solely through their personal experience, and the conclusions of science are often challenged in the ruling-class media.

â€¢ The crisis has no outbreak; it develops only gradually and over a lifetime.  
Effects are displaced in time: What capitalism does now breeds disaster only decades later.

â€¢ Effects are displaced in space: The damage of carbon emissions in rich countries is felt above all in poverty-stricken areas of the world.

â€¢ Effects are displaced in terms of social class: Climate change is caused mainly by the actions of the rich; the effects are felt mainly by the poor.

These factors may help us understand the slowness of working-class reaction to oncoming disaster, but they do not explain the response of socialists.

## Socialism or barbarism

Before 1914, there was widespread popular unconcern regarding the war danger and illusions in capitalism's ability to muddle through. But in the socialist movement, all currents recognized the war threat and sought to take action to meet the challenge.

Today, socialists are divided regarding the challenge of climate-fueled crisis. Those who deny the evidence are now rare, but many voices stress capitalism's capacity to adapt, while others caution against voicing blunt warnings about the oncoming disaster and question whether workers are capable of understanding the danger and taking action. [20]

Participants in this Socialism 2014 conference have been in the vanguard in responding to the challenge of climate change. They have joined in building an ecosocialist movement, that is, an action movement for environmental justice committed to system change, to socialism.

Like the socialists at Stuttgart, this movement does not shrink from speaking the truth regarding capitalism's plunge into disaster. We do not announce some "tipping point" as the deadline for revolution. We stress that we will conduct our struggle through to victory, no matter how long it takes, and how great the suffering that capitalism imposes upon humanity and the damage done to our biosphere.

The resolutions of the Stuttgart congress suggested a global strategy linking its stand against war with opposition to colonialism. So too, today, ecosocialists link their call to action on climate change with a defense of its victims among the dispossessed and in poor and dependent countries.

Like the Zimmerwald Movement, we do not rely on the imperialist rulers to take appropriate action; our response to capitalism's climate change is that only the united determination of the people can overcome the crisis. In responding to climate change, we struggle for freedom, liberation of the oppressed, and socialism.

We build broad and effective campaigns around issues like the Keystone tar sands pipeline, challenging corporate and government policies that augment climate change and put working people at risk.

Socialists fuse environmental goals with the longstanding demands of the working class. This approach has come to be called climate or environmental justice.

What we are building could well be a crucial component of a twenty-first century Zimmerwald movement.

We take our lead from Rosa Luxemburg, writing what was to become celebrated as the “Junius pamphlet” while in jail during the war. She sought to avoid fruitless speculation over the degree to which capitalism can adapt, and counterposed the socialist solution to capitalist disaster.

She reworded (from memory) a thought found in classic texts by both Engels and Marx as follows: “Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.” [21] This puts it well: an accurate description of what we face and a solid foundation for a revolutionary movement.

John Riddell

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[1] This article is based on documents collected in John Riddell, *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (hereinafter LSRI), New York: Pathfinder, 1984, 604 pp, especially pp. 1–53 and 276–326. A more recent, 940-page printing of this collection is available from Pathfinder. For another analysis of the events described here, see R. Craig Nation, *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2009.

[2] LSRI, p. 23.

[3] LSRI, p. 35.

[4] In August 1914, Hervé and Guesde betrayed the Stuttgart resolution by rallying to support French imperialism in the war. Bebel died in 1913; Jaurès was assassinated on the eve of the war in 1914.

[5] For Lenin's comment on negotiations with Bebel and with party lawyers, see LSRI, p. 47

[6] LSRI, pp. 31-2.



[7] This observation is made by Lars Lih in his unpublished paper, “Bolshevism and the Basel Manifesto.”

[8] LSRI, pp. 103–4.

[9] LSRI, p. 6.

[10] LSRI, p. 14.

[11] LSRI, p. 39.

[12] LSRI, p. 99. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960-71, vol. 19, pp. 99–100.

[13] LSRI, pp. 15–223.

[14] LSRI, pp. 125–6, 130–31.

[15] LSRI, pp. 122, 121.

[16] LSRI, p. 279.

[17] LSRI, p. 320.

[18] LSRI, p. 331. See also Hal Draper, “The Myth of Lenin’s Revolutionary Defeatism,” in *New International*, 19:5, 19:6, and 20:1, and at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/dra...>

[19] When the Communist International was formed in March 1919, five leading members of the Zimmerwald Association stated that it had included “forces that were centrist, pacifist, and vacillating,” who later “allied themselves with social patriots.” All “that was truly revolutionary” in it “is passing over into the Communist International,” they said. The declaration was signed by Lenin, Zinoviev, and Fritz Platten, of the Zimmerwald Left; and Trotsky and Rakovsky, who had stood outside that formation. John Riddell, *Founding the Communist International*, New York: Pathfinder, 1987, p. 182.

[20] See Sasha Lilly et al., *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012.

[21] See Michel Löwy, “Socialism or Barbarism,” <http://www.revleft.com/vb/>