

On the Manifesto of the 16

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To the series of considerations on this subject from comrades in the columns of Plus Loin, I would like to add a few words. For several years now this disagreement endured in the anarchist milieu, and neither time, nor events seem to teach anything to either side. Every time we broach the issue, angers flare up again with renewed strength. And yet, wasn't the importance of this disagreement exaggerated? Do we not amplify it through some kind of self-suggestion, through the habit of arguments, always the same? Let's remind ourselves of how many of those who later called the signatories of the "Manifesto of the Sixteen" renegades were, in the first days of the war, staunch supporters of resistance against the German army marching on Paris. Let's recall also that when, in 1912, during the Balkan war, *Les Temps Nouveaux* published articles by Kropotkin and Tcherkesoff expressing broadly similar opinions to those which were later to raise so much outrage, no one thought of crying treason. It is obvious that it is only much later, and progressively, that the divergence of opinions grew to gigantic proportions in the eyes of comrades.

Can we claim that the outcome of any war – civil wars excepted – is indifferent to us? There are wars the outcomes of which decides the political or national independence of peoples; there are wars in which the victory of an adversary can bring about a strong general reactionary movement. Lastly, here is a very clear example nearer to us: suppose that a power or a coalition of powers now declare war on Russia. Whatever our opinion on the current internal regime of Russia, the Russian revolution, in itself, is of such value that a danger which threatens its conquests cannot leave us indifferent. However, it cannot be contested that such a war would oppose the old world to the beginnings of a new life, although under the form of a conflict between two states and two armies.

Our attitude towards a war therefore varies according to circumstances; we can discuss whether such and such a fighting side is worth defending, if such and such an outcome would be a step forward or backward for humankind, but we must not turn an issue of appreciation or prediction of events into an issue of principle of first importance.

There is yet another aspect of the issue which seems to have been overlooked until now. Yes, there is indubitably a contradiction in the attitude of anarchists who, during the great war, sided with one of the opponents. We should not close our eyes on this. We cannot deny that taking part in a war is a violation of pacifist and anti-militarist principles, that the fact of joining an army and to submit to discipline is an important concession. But isn't this lack of logic inherent

to life itself? Could anarchists escape this contradiction? And didn't those who held the opposite view fall into as obvious a contradiction, although in the opposite direction? Actually, no one could escape it, since, if taking part in the war violates pacifist and anti-militarist principles, non-resistance to invading armies constitutes at least as great a violation of the principle of resistance to oppression, and at least as great an abandonment of the spirit of revolt. These conflicts are the work of life itself. The most serious one is the one which is faced by the conscience of each revolutionary: on the one hand, the principle of the inviolability of human beings; on the other, the right to insurrection and revolutionary struggle in the name of the emancipation of these same human beings. We must choose, just as we had to choose at the time of the war. And even abstention, inaction are no solution: non-resistance to evil is always, in reality, a service to the stronger side. In one way or another, anarchists were forced to throw their opinion onto the scales. And which one of the two conflicting principles is more general, deeper, more precious: the pacifist and anti-militarist principle or the principle of resistance to oppression? Indubitably, the latter. Anti-militarism is only one particular form of opposition to the state, like war is only one particular manifestation of the capitalist and hierarchical organisation of society. On the contrary, the idea of resistance, of a struggle against a strong power, of the defence of rights and liberties of every social group, of the struggle against reaction in all its forms, is the fundamental idea of the anarchist movement; but it is not under this abnormal aspect that we must picture them in a serious discussion.

Nowadays, actually, it seems that the issue has slightly changed: we mainly focus on the considerations on the results of the war, we discuss on the issue of knowing whether the reaction has grown stronger or weaker, on what things would look like if Germany had won, etc. The current reaction supports the thesis of the opponents to the participation in the war, that is a fact; but if events had gone differently, the reaction which would have followed the victory of Germany would have also supported the opposite view and would therefore have changed the opinion of the anarchist milieu.

In the conditions, the issue loses its importance: it is no longer a matter of the anarchist principles of the authors of the Manifesto, but of their political perspicacity: were they wrong when they thought the game was worth it? But can the question asked this way preserve the importance that we gave it and prevent comrades to work together when they are only kept apart by a different appreciation of the political situation at a given time?

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