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Anti-Militarism: Was it Properly Understood?

Pëtr Kropotkin

November, 1914

In the fact that Anarchists are divided in their attitude towards the war, after all there is no harm. On the contrary, one may be sure that in proportion as the events develop there will grow more and more unity in our opinions, the present divergences inducing all of us to go deeper into certain points of our teachings, which hitherto had been taken more or less on faith. It is only regretful that these discussions begin now, when the danger menacing France and Belgium ought to be met by the united effort of all, to the extent of every one's forces and capacities, and when the Anarchists may have shown that they are not only fine reasoners, but also men of initiative, who have something of their own to say when a country has to live through such a calamity as the one we are now living through.

One of the points which must be reconsidered is, I think, the too great confidence in a general strike, as a means of preventing war. Introduced first as a means to provoke or to inaugurate the Social Revolution, the general strike was recommended later on as a means of preventing war, without notic-

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ing for a long time the contradiction which this advice contained.

We said, on the one side, that the true causes of wars were no longer the ambitions of kings, but *Capitalism and State*. "So long as Capitalism and State exist," we used to say, "we shall have wars: they are the unavoidable, fatal consequences of the two. And both Capitalism and State can only be destroyed by a thorough-going revolution. Perhaps even several revolutions will be required to accomplish that destruction."

And then, on the other side, it was asserted that it would be sufficient to have an agreement between the workers of different nations to declare a general strike, as soon as the Governments would intend to go to war, and wars would become impossible!

It came to this: In one sentence it was said that wars are a necessary consequence of Capitalism and State; and the next sentence was: "Although we have not yet got rid of Capitalism and State, we can prevent war by a general strike!"

This was a sheer contradiction. Either Capitalism and State are not the causes of wars, or wars can not be prevented by a general strike. If an international war-strike were possible at the moment of a declaration of war, this would mean that an international Social Revolution was already quite ripe to break out.

Remember that at the same time there was in every country a very numerous section of Socialists—the Social Democrats—who preached to the workers, in accordance with the Marxist teaching, that the abolition of Capitalism cannot be brought about before Capitalism has attained such a development as to concentrate its ever-growing and all-absorbing powers in a few hands, after having destroyed the small capitalists and the small industries. From this assertion it was even deduced that the great States must absorb all the smaller ones. This was, we were told, the proper way towards internationalism.

and if these opinions had been submitted to a thorough discussion in international congresses, far from awakening national hatred and jealousies, such a discussion would have created an infinitely stronger international anti-militarist feeling. Very possibly this feeling would not have been strong enough to prevent the present war; but every one would have seen who were the invaders; and it would have been understood that in a war of invasion every one is bound to take sides against the invaders, and to do his utmost, in one way or another, to aid those who try heroically to defend their fields and their cities. There would have been less theoretical discussion, but there would have been more action.

There are two or three more questions which it would be useful to discuss in this connection; but they will have to be left for another article.

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German workers began talking, in their turn, like their bourgeois exploiters, about the necessity of conquering vast territories in the East for sending there the surplus of population; they spoke of colonies wanted for the enrichment of the German nation as a whole; they talked of the wickedness of France and Britain, who had already taken all the richest colonies, and left nothing to the poor Germans; and very few were those who risked to say from time to time that there are German colonies well worth colonising by German emigrants, or that the inner colonisation of the province of Posen with German settlers was a wicked thing. And in the meantime the Social Democratic press spread the idea of a great, powerful Capitalism being a necessary condition for the coming of age of Socialism.

Gradually the workers, not only in Germany, but in all industrial nations as well, began to share more or less similar fallacies. When the Boer War began, great numbers of British working men approved of the conquest, and they began to protest against it only when their sense of fair play was offended by the way in which the war was conducted. The enthusiasm which the robbery expedition to Tripoli provoked at the outset in large sections of the Italian nation was another consequence of the insufficient knowledge of the real causes of wars. And if the Social Democratic representatives in the German Reichstag voted, a few days before the war began, by 100 voices against 14, the immense sums of money asked by the Government for the war, it was again the result of the ignorance in which the masses of all nations were kept, even by the leaders of the advanced parties, of the real causes that prepared this war. (Now they say that they voted that money because they were not told that it was intended to invade Belgium. There are no worse ignoramuses than the willing ones.)

There is not the slightest doubt that if a sound opinion about the great international problems of the day had been elaborated by the joint action of the better informed anti-militarists,

A few of us tried to prove how false was this teaching, but once it was shared by millions of workers, dazzled by its would-be scientific appearance, in Germany, Austria, and even in France and Italy—how could these millions (even apart from their “patriotism”) join in a general strike which would hamper the growth of Capitalism in their country? Everything, on the contrary, would induce them to support their capitalists in extending their powers over new countries, in growing richer and richer, and in rendering the State to which they belonged more and more powerful.

This is why (as I have said already a couple of weeks ago, in a letter addressed to a Russian paper) I began, already ten or twelve years ago, to warn my French friends that they were cherishing a dangerous illusion. A general strike, to be efficacious, must be entered upon by the two nations going to fight. But in case of a Franco-German war there was not the slightest chance of this being the case. The German Social Democrats would not think, even for a single moment, of *not* joining the mobilisation; and in such a condition, even one single day of war-strike in France would mean the loss of a province, the gift of a hundred thousand men to the Germans, and the addition of a thousand million francs to the indemnity. No sensible man in France would join the strike.

So it happened in reality.

We must, then, have the courage to recognise that so long as the present economic conditions prevail, there will be nations where not only the capitalist and military classes, but the workers as well, *will continue to consider that wars for the conquest of other people's rich countries and of populations backward in industrial development are the proper means for the enrichment of the whole nation.*

It being so, the question arises: How is anti-militarist propaganda to be conducted?

The reply is evident: It must be supplemented by a promise of direct action. An anti-militarist ought never to join the anti-militarist [a]gitation without taking in his inner self a solemn vow that in case a war breaks out, notwithstanding all efforts to prevent it, he will give the full support of his action to the country that will be invaded by a neighbour, whosoever the neighbour may be. Because, if the anti-militarists remain mere onlookers on the war, they support by their inaction the invaders; they help them to make slaves of the conquered populations; they aid them to become still stronger, and thus to be a still stronger obstacle to the Social Revolution in the future.

Which shape the help to the invaded nation will take in each individual will depend, of course, upon the individual temperament. He who is bent on rhetorics will not become a fighter, and *vice versa*. But men and women of the most varied capacities will find a full scope for the application of their powers in time of war. It must not be forgotten, indeed, that for every million men fighting in the battle lines there are at least twice, if not thrice, that number of men and women engaged in the support of the armies, the preparation and the transport of supplies and munitions, the removal and the nursing of the wounded, the care of the soldiers' families, and the food supply for the populations remaining at home. Let us only mention how old and young in the French and Russian villages are working now at the ploughing and the sowing of the fields of those fighting in the army; how immense is the number of men and women engaged in this country in freely organised work to aid the nation to pull through the war; or let us remember the immense new-born organisation of the Union of the Zemstvos (County Councils), which is preparing just now to attend to the needs of 750,000 wounded, who are brought to Moscow for further distribution in the provinces, which organisation manages it in an admirable way, by free consent, because it is independent of the St. Petersburg bureaucracy.

Of course, it may and will surely be asked: "But what is to be done if the country which invades another country's territory is itself invaded by a third country?" But this is only dialectical arguing. Every honest man, if he only takes the trouble of paying attention to what is going on in the world, will easily find the reply. He will always know in every particular case who is the real invader, and whose invasion must be resisted. This is why every one who has paid any attention to what has been going on in Europe since the war of 1870, and especially during the last twenty years, knows perfectly well tha[t] the aggressor in this war is Germany. And those who did not know it two months ago must see it now, when they learn how carefully the invasion was prepared.

Of course, there are millions of Germans who will not agree that their Fatherland was the aggressor. For forty years they were taught to think so. But whose fault is it? Are we not also guilty ourselves to a great extent, if anti-militarism has been floating till now in generalities, without examining the concrete causes which were leading to this war? When our comrades preached that the present frontiers of the States must remain what they are now, and no war must be fought to alter them, they committed, I must say, an unpardonable blunder. They took matters too easily. They refused to enter into a consideration of the questions of the smaller oppressed nationalities; they did not care to examine the real conditions of entrenched camps like Metz, the Mazur lakes, and the like, which were erected by the Germans for attacking their neighbours, and which must be dismantled if Europe is to have peace; they refused to consider the vassal conditions into which the small nations, like Belgium or Servia, were placed towards their powerful neighbours. They said: "This is politics!" and for that reason dismissed it.

The result was—we see it now—that an immense mass of working men accepted the teaching of their middle classes. The