

War or Peace?

Pëtr Kropotkin

July 1896

Next Sunday the workers of all nations are going to make an important peace demonstration, and they are sure to well represent in this case the opinions of the workers all over the world.

But who are those who want war? Whose war-cries resound every day in our ears? Who will be conspicuous by their absence at the international peace gathering of the workers?—the ruling classes!

Always *they* have been the instigators of wars in times past, and so they are up to the present time. In times past it was the kings who waged wars in order to re-fill their cash boxes, to distribute new provinces amongst their “war companions,” to give “occupation” to the gang of robbers, drunkards, and gamblers of whom their following was composed. It was the wizzards, the witches, and the high priests who, pretending to be in direct intercourse with supernatural forces, promised the support of the gods for war as soon as they saw that war would increase their powers upon men or accrue to their wealth: It was the noble lords of the land—smaller kings themselves—who made of war their profession, in order to always get new slaves or serfs, and to better enslave those whom they possessed of old. And so they went on—the Triple Alliance of those times—sacking and burning, killing and plundering the peasants and the artisans within and without the borders of their own countries.

The peasants and the artisans, on the other hand, did always all in their powers to escape from the war obligations, and to stay at home while they were ordered to join the armed bands. They cursed war when it was successful for their rulers, and they cursed it when it was unsuccessful and brought the enemy upon their fields and in their houses. They started immense secret unions to resist war and to prevent it, and as soon as they felt in force the peasants besieged the nests of war—the castles—and destroyed them when they could; while the artisans erected walls around their towns and prohibited their access to any armed man—robber, lord, or king. They joined immense conjurations maintaining “God’s peace,” and later on, at the beginning of the Reform, they started widely spread religious movements to oppose war. And when those movements had been defeated and the peasants had been massacred, the survivors started in Moravia and elsewhere their communities, in which scores of thousands of peasants and artisans joined, taking the oath of never unsheathing the sword; and they prospered in those communities until these Communal houses were pillaged and destroyed by the triple alliance of King, Church, and Lord.

War always came from above—from those who did not live on the work of their hands, but lived upon the blood and the sweat of the manual workers. And so it is up to the present date, with the only difference that the kings, having now lost their importance, the real instigators of wars are the lords of the land, of the factory, of the mine, and of the Stock Exchange.

Was it the *people* of Japan and China who waged lately that terrible war? Was it the kings? No; it was the capitalists! Two years before the war broke out a serious work was published in Germany about the growing industries of Japan; and its conclusion was that the sudden growth of the big factory system in Japan must very soon result in a war. “The people of Japan being too poor to buy what the big factories manufacture, Japan must wage a war for markets against its nearest neighbours.” Such was the writer’s conclusion.

And the war came. Japan had become an industrial country; it had become also a modern State—that is, a perfect organisation for pumping money out of the people—and war was unavoidable. European capitalists freely granted loans; the ironclads and the ton-guns were gladly supplied by the big war establishments of this country—which are hypocritically described by their pious owners as “workshops for the guarantee of peace”—and thousands of Japanese and Chinese were massacred for the enrichment of Japanese, and especially European, capitalists; while the newspaper people of Europe made money by relating, with relish, how transport ships having thousands of men on board were sunk to the bottom of the ocean by torpedoes, how men and women were massacred, how thousands of wounded were landed, and so on.

Was it not the same with the Franco-German war? The fashion is now to throw the fault for that war upon Napoleon III. But who was it. who made the power of that highway adventurer? Of whom was composed the throng in his Babylonian palace? The middle-classes to whom he had promised free hand for enrichment, and a strong hand against the Socialist workers. The middle-classes of both Germany and France were long since preparing that war. Their literature was full of incitements to hatred between the two nations. The best novelists of the time had their share in that wicked work, Who would rule the markets—France or Germany? Who would have a free hand for sweating the industrially backward nations? This was the gist of the terrible war which has cost millions of lives, and whose black shadows still float over European civilisation.

That was then. But now, is it not the same again? How many middle-class papers can the worker read without finding in them the same incitements to national hatred and war, in whatever language the paper may be written ?

In this country *all* has been done lately by a part of the ruling classes to awaken the lust of war. In illustrated papers, imaginary wars, ending in the capture of Rotterdam by the English and the triumph of England over the world, were minutely described.

Ironclads were sunk, in print and on engravings, populous cities were bombarded, war was waged between balloons in the air, between miners under ground, and between boats under the water—not, for describing the horrors of war, but to delude peaceful clerks and workers who know nothing of war, and to make them believe in the grandeur and the splendour of war, to breed emotional hatred, to raise the Jingo spirit. The Napoleon legend was revived, the bloody

battles of the past were retold and embellished, the worship of “national heroes”—Stanley Rhodes inclusive—was brought into fashion, and thousands of pounds were sunk by rich volunteers to put on the stage “patriotic dramas” which, it must be owned, fell flat nevertheless.

Was not also the invasion of Pretoria and the proposed capture of its capital part of a vast plan intended to revive the war spirit in this country and prepare it for the creation of an empire which would have extended from the Cape to India, and in which gold-digging, Matabele-hunting, and Egypt-scorching would have offered “new issues” for “the poor rich ones” who so loudly complain of the pinch of the times.

The worst is that the whole of the press submits to that same influence. In one column we find lamentations about the warlike spirit of man or the cruelty of the ladies who wear heron feathers on hats; and in the next column we read: “*Our* artillery made splendid work,” “the rebels were mowed down by *our* shots,” and so on. Rebels! Those unarmed, miserable men whose “cattle and women” are taken by the filibusters, whose women and children are not spared, and of whom the young English sportsman writes: “*It is great fun potting niggers off and seeing them fall like nine pins!*”

And what is done in this country is done all over the world, in the press, in the school, in the speeches, and in private conversation, by all those who have made up their minds to make money out of the sweat of the masses and the blood of the war-conflicts.

To this crusade of war the workers are bound to oppose their united action. They must loudly denounce that wicked propaganda which is preparing the shedding of streams of blood in a near future; they must put a stop to it.

They must raise their mighty voice and loudly affirm that they will *not* allow the mercantile writer to breed cruelty amongst our children, and to accustom them to utterly despise human life, to attach no value whatever to it; and to believe that in the interests of the State, or of separate classes, human lives may be destroyed to any amount. The lessons of cruelty and despising of human life with which modern middle-class literature is permeated already bear their fruit, and they menace, if they continue, to throw the next generation a century aback by wiping out of our civilisation the humanitarian progress that had lately been achieved.

It may be in the interest of French capitalists to conquer provinces on the Rhine, and of German capitalists to annex Burgundy or the Baltic provinces. It may suit the Russian and British manufacturers to make a partition of Armenia, or to fight upon the corpses of the Armenians; and it may be very profitable for the international bankocracy to ruin the nations by war preparations and to plunge them into endless wars.

But the workers have nothing to win at wars, and they have nothing to expect from wars but that a further lease will be granted to the upper classes for living upon the fruits of the labour of the proletariat, and that the international solidarity which now begins to be established among the workers of all nations, will again be destroyed, as it was destroyed for many years by the war of 1870.

And at the same time an immense work—a heavy duty towards themselves and their own children—lies before and upon the workers. They have their own conquests of quite a different

kind to achieve—not abroad, but at home. They have to conquer Liberty, which for a wage-slave is a vain word. They have to conquer Equality, which cannot exist between the ruler and the ruled, the palace-owner and the slum-dweller, the university man and the miner's boy. And they have to establish Fraternity, which will remain a mere sarcasm so long as the State organisation will give to the few the means to drive millions of men against each other for mutual extermination.

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Note: The international Peace Demonstration on Sunday July 26, preceded the 1896 Congress of the 2nd International in London.

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