

Rosa Luxemburg, "The War and the Workers"-- The Junius Pamphlet (1916)

[The voting of war credits in August 1914 was a shattering moment in the life of individual socialists and of the socialist movement in Europe. Those who had worked for and wholly believed in the ability of organized labor to stand against war now saw the major social democratic parties of Germany, France, and England rush to the defense of their fatherlands. Worker solidarity had proved an impotent myth. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) had for years warned against the stultifying effects of the overly bureaucratized German Social Democratic Party and the anti-revolutionary tendencies of the trade unions that played such a large role in the party's policy decisions. The abdication of 1914 had proved her right but had also dashed the revolutionary yearnings of a lifetime. While she was able to construct new hope from the revolutionary opportunities presented by the war, Luxemburg could not shake the knowledge that, whatever the outcome, the European working class would pay the greatest price in blood and suffering. Thrice handicapped--a woman, a Pole, and a Jew--Luxemburg was the most eloquent voice of the left wing of German Social Democracy, the defender of Marxist purity against all comers, and a constant advocate of radical action. She spent much of the war in jail, where she wrote and then smuggled out the pamphlet excerpted below. Published under the name "Junius," perhaps a reference to Lucius Junius Brutus, a legendary republican hero of ancient Rome, the pamphlet became the guiding statement for the International Group, which became the Spartacus League and ultimately the Communist Party of Germany (January 1, 1919). Luxemburg was instrumental in these developments and, along with Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919), led the Spartacists until their murder by right-wing vigilantes on January 15, 1919. Source: Günter Radczun (ed.), "Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie (Junius-Broschüre)," in Rosa Luxemburg, *Politische Schriften* (Leipzig, 1970), pp. 229-43, 357-72. Translated by Richard S. Levy.]

TEXT

Chapter 1

The scene has changed fundamentally. The six weeks' march to Paris has grown into a world drama.^[1] Mass slaughter has become the tiresome and monotonous business of the day and the end is no closer. Bourgeois statecraft is held fast in its own vise. The spirits summoned up can no longer be exorcised.

Gone is the euphoria. Gone the patriotic noise in the streets, the chase after the gold-colored automobile, one false telegram after another, the wells poisoned by cholera, the Russian students heaving bombs over every railway bridge in Berlin, the French airplanes over Nuremberg, the spy hunting public running amok in the streets, the swaying crowds in the coffee shops with ear-deafening patriotic songs surging ever higher, whole city neighborhoods transformed into mobs ready to denounce, to mistreat women, to shout hurrah and to induce delirium in themselves by means of wild

rumors. Gone, too, is the atmosphere of ritual murder, the Kishinev air where the crossing guard is the only remaining representative of human dignity. [2]

The spectacle is over. German scholars, those "stumbling lemurs," have been whistled off the stage long ago. The trains full of reservists are no longer accompanied by virgins fainting from pure jubilation. They no longer greet the people from the windows of the train with joyous smiles. Carrying their packs, they quietly trot along the streets where the public goes about its daily business with aggrieved visages.

In the prosaic atmosphere of pale day there sounds a different chorus--the hoarse cries of the vulture and the hyenas of the battlefield. Ten thousand tarpaulins guaranteed up to regulations! A hundred thousand kilos of bacon, cocoa powder, coffee-substitute --c.o.d, immediate delivery! Hand grenades, lathes, cartridge pouches, marriage bureaus for widows of the fallen, leather belts, jobbers for war orders--serious offers only! The cannon fodder loaded onto trains in August and September is moldering in the killing fields of Belgium, the Vosges, and Masurian Lakes where the profits are springing up like weeds. It's a question of getting the harvest into the barn quickly. Across the ocean stretch thousands of greedy hands to snatch it up.

Business thrives in the ruins. Cities become piles of ruins; villages become cemeteries; countries, deserts; populations are beggared; churches, horse stalls. International law, treaties and alliances, the most sacred words and the highest authority have been torn in shreds. Every sovereign "by the grace of God" is called a rogue and lying scoundrel by his cousin on the other side. Every diplomat is a cunning rascal to his colleagues in the other party. Every government sees every other as dooming its own people and worthy only of universal contempt. There are food riots in Venice, in Lisbon, Moscow, Singapore. There is plague in Russia, and misery and despair everywhere.

Violated, dishonored, wading in blood, dripping filth--there stands bourgeois society. This is it [in reality]. Not all spic and span and moral, with pretense to culture, philosophy, ethics, order, peace, and the rule of law--but the ravening beast, the witches' sabbath of anarchy, a plague to culture and humanity. Thus it reveals itself in its true, its naked form.

In the midst of this witches' sabbath a catastrophe of world-historical proportions has happened: International Social Democracy has capitulated. To deceive ourselves about it, to cover it up, would be the most foolish, the most fatal thing the proletariat could do. Marx says: "...the democrat (that is, the petty bourgeois revolutionary) [comes] out of the most shameful defeats as unmarked as he naively went into them; he comes away with the newly gained conviction that he must be victorious, not that he or his party ought to give up the old principles, but that conditions ought to accommodate him." [3] The modern proletariat comes out of historical tests differently. Its tasks and its errors are both gigantic: no prescription, no schema valid for every case, no infallible leader to show it the path to follow. Historical experience is its only school mistress. Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey--its emancipation depends on this--is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors. Self-criticism, remorseless, cruel, and going to the core of things is the life's breath and light of the proletarian movement. The fall of the socialist proletariat in the present world war is unprecedented. It is a misfortune for humanity. But socialism will be lost only if the international proletariat fails to measure the depth of this fall, if it refuses to learn from it.

The last forty-five year period in the development of the modern labor movement now stands in doubt. What we are experiencing in this critique is a closing of accounts for what will soon be half a century of work at our posts. The grave of the Paris Commune ended the first phase of the European labor movement as well as the First International. [4] Since then there began a new phase. In place of spontaneous revolutions, risings, and barricades, after which the proletariat each time fell back into passivity, there began the systematic daily struggle, the exploitation of bourgeois parliamentarianism, mass organizations, the marriage of the economic with the political struggle, and that of socialist ideals with stubborn defense of immediate daily interests. For the first time the polestar of strict scientific teachings lit the way for the proletariat and for its emancipation. Instead of sects, schools, utopias, and isolated experiments in various countries, there arose a uniform, international theoretical basis which bound countries together like the strands of a rope. Marxist knowledge gave the working class of the entire world a compass by which it can make sense of the welter of daily events and by which it can always plot the right course to take to the fixed and final goal.

She who bore, championed, and protected this new method was German Social Democracy. The [Franco-Prussian] War and the defeat of the Paris Commune had shifted the center of gravity for the European workers' movement to Germany. As France was the classic site of the first phase of proletarian class struggle and Paris the beating, bleeding heart of the European laboring classes of those times, so the German workers became the vanguard of the second phase. By means of countless sacrifices and tireless attention to detail, they have built the strongest organization, the one most worthy of emulation; they created the biggest press, called the most effective means of education and enlightenment into being, gathered the most powerful masses of voters and attained the greatest number of parliamentary mandates. German Social Democracy was considered the purest embodiment of Marxist socialism. She had and laid claim to a special place in the Second International--its instructress and leader. [5]

In his famous 1895 foreword to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, Friedrich Engels wrote:

No matter what happens in other countries, German Social Democracy has a special position and therefore a special task, at least for the time being. The two million voters it sends to the ballot box, and the young men and women who, although non-voters, stand behind them, constitute the most numerous and compact mass, the "decisive force" of the proletarian army.

German Social Democracy, as the Vienna *Arbeiterzeitung* wrote on August 5, 1914, was "the jewel of class-conscious proletarian organizations." In her footsteps trod the increasingly enthusiastic Social Democrats of France, Italy, and Belgium, the labor movements of Holland, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and the United States. The Slavic countries, the Russians, the Social Democrats of the Balkans looked upon [German Social Democracy] with limitless, nearly uncritical, admiration. In the Second International the German "decisive force" played the determining role. At the [international] congresses, in the meetings of the international socialist bureaus, all awaited the opinion of the Germans. Especially in the questions of the struggle against militarism and war, German Social Democracy always took the lead. "For us Germans that is unacceptable" regularly sufficed to decide the orientation of the Second International, which blindly bestowed its confidence upon the admired leadership of the mighty German Social Democracy: the pride of every socialist and the terror of the

ruling classes everywhere.

And what did we in Germany experience when the great historical test came? The most precipitous fall, the most violent collapse. Nowhere has the organization of the proletariat been yoked so completely to the service of imperialism. Nowhere is the state of siege borne so docilely. [6] Nowhere is the press so hobbled, public opinion so stifled, the economic and political class struggle of the working class so totally surrendered as in Germany.

But German Social Democracy was not merely the strongest vanguard troop, it was the thinking head of the International. For this reason, we must begin the analysis, the self-examination process, with its fall. It has the duty to begin the salvation of international socialism, that means unsparing criticism of itself. None of the other parties, none of the other classes of bourgeois society, may look clearly and openly into the mirror of their own errors, their own weaknesses, for the mirror reflects their historical limitations and the historical doom that awaits them. The working class can boldly look truth straight in the face, even the bitterest self-renunciation, for its weaknesses are only confusion. The strict law of history gives back its power, stands guarantee for its final victory.

Unsparing self-criticism is not merely an essential for its existence but the working class' supreme duty. On our ship we have the most valuable treasures of mankind, and the proletariat is their ordained guardian! And while bourgeois society, shamed and dishonored by the bloody orgy, rushes headlong toward its doom, the international proletariat must and will gather up the golden treasure that, in a moment of weakness and confusion in the chaos of the world war, it has allowed to sink to the ground.

One thing is certain. The world war is a turning point. It is foolish and mad to imagine that we need only survive the war, like a rabbit waiting out the storm under a bush, in order to fall happily back into the old routine once it is over. The world war has altered the conditions of our struggle and, most of all, it has changed us. Not that the basic law of capitalist development, the life-and-death war between capital and labor, will experience any amelioration. But now, in the midst of the war, the masks are falling and the old familiar visages smirk at us. The tempo of development has received a mighty jolt from the eruption of the volcano of imperialism. The violence of the conflicts in the bosom of society, the enormosity of the tasks that tower up before the socialist proletariat--these make everything that has transpired in the history of the workers' movement seem a pleasant idyll.

Historically, this war was ordained to thrust forward the cause of the proletariat....It was ordained to drive the German proletariat to the pinnacle of the nation and thereby begin to organize the international and universal conflict between capital and labor for political power within the state.

And did we envision a different role for the working class in the world war? Let us recall how we, only a short while ago, were accustomed to describe the future:

Then comes the *catastrophe*. Then the great mobilization will take place in Europe; 16-18 million men, the flower of the various nations, armed with the best tools of death, will enter the field as enemies. But, I am convinced, that behind the great mobilization there stands the *great havoc*. It will not come through our agency, but rather yours. You are driving things to the limit. You are leading us to catastrophe. You will reap what you have sown. The *Götterdämmerung of the bourgeois world approaches. Believe it! It is*

approaching! [All italics are Luxemburg's.]

Thus spoke our leader, [August] Bebel, during the Reichstag debate on the Morocco Crisis. [7]

Imperialism or Socialism?, the official party pamphlet distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies a few years ago, closes with these words:

Thus the struggle against imperialism develops ever more into the decisive struggle between capital and labor. War crises, rising prices, capitalism vs. peace, welfare for all, socialism! Thus is the question stated. *History is moving toward great decisions.* The proletariat must work unceasingly at its world-historical task, strengthen its organization, the clarity of its understanding. Then come what may, be it that [proletarian] power spares mankind the terrible cruelty of a world war, *or be it that the capitalist world sinks into history in the same way as it was born, in blood and violence.* [In either case] *the historical hour will find the working class prepared--and preparation is everything.* [All italics are Luxemburg's.]

The official *Handbook for Social-Democratic Voters* (1911), for the last Reichstag election, says on p. 42 concerning the expected world war:

Do our rulers and ruling classes expect the peoples to permit this awful thing? Will not a cry of horror, of scorn, of outrage not seize the peoples and cause them to put an end to this murder? Will they not ask: For whom? what's it all for? Are we mentally disturbed to be treated this way, to allow ourselves to be so treated? He who is calmly convinced of the probability of a great European war can come to no other conclusion than the following: The next European war will be such a desperate gamble as the world has never seen. In all probability it will be the last war.

With speeches and words such as these, our current Reichstag deputies acquired their 110 mandates.

In the summer of 1911, when the *Panther* made its lunge to Agadir [8] and the noisy agitation of the German imperialists put war in the immediate offing, an international meeting in London accepted the following resolution (August 4, 1911):

The delegates of the German, Spanish, English, Dutch, and French workers' organizations declare themselves *to be ready to oppose any declaration of war with all the means at their disposal.* Every represented nation undertakes the obligation, according to the resolutions of national and international congresses, *to act against all criminal machinations of the ruling classes.*

When, in November 1912, the congress of the International met in the minster at Basel and when the long procession of worker representatives entered the cathedral, everyone present felt a presentiment of the greatness of the coming destiny and a heroic resolve.

The cool, skeptical Victor Adler spoke:

Comrades, the most important thing is that we are here at the common source of our

strength, that we can draw from this strength so that each can do in his own country what he can, according to the forms and means that we have, to oppose the crime of war with all the power we possess. And if it can be stopped, if it is really stopped, *then we must see to it that it becomes a cornerstone for the end* [of bourgeois society]. This is the moving spirit for the whole International. And if murder and arson and pestilence are unleashed throughout civilized Europe--we can only think of this with horror, outrage and indignation churning in our breasts. *And we ask ourselves: are we men, are the proletarians of today still sheep* that they can be led dumbly to slaughter?....

And [Jean] Jaures concluded the reading of the International Bureau's manifesto against the war with these words:

The International represents all the moral force of the world! And if the tragic hour strikes and we must give ourselves up to it, the consciousness of this will support and strengthen us. We do not merely say "no" *but from the depth of our hearts we declare ourselves ready to sacrifice everything.*

It was reminiscent of the Oath of Ruetli. [\[9\]](#) The world directed its gaze to the church at Basel where the bell sounded solemnly for the future great battle between the army of labor and the power of capital....

Even a week before the outbreak of war, on July 26, 1914, German party newspapers wrote:

We are not marionettes. We combat with all our energy a system that makes men into will-less tools of blind circumstance, this capitalism that seeks to transform a Europe thirsting for peace into a steaming slaughterhouse. If destruction has its way, if the united will to peace of the German, the international proletariat, which will make itself known in powerful demonstrations in the coming days, if the world war cannot be fended off, then at least this should be the last war, it should become the Götterdämmerung of capitalism. (Frankfurter Volksstimme)

Then on July 30, 1914, the central organ of German Social Democracy stated:

The socialist proletariat rejects any responsibility for the events being brought about by a blinded, a maddened ruling class. Let it be known that *a new life shall bloom from the ruins. All responsibility falls to the wielders of power today!* It is "to be or not to be!" "World-history is the world-court!"

And then came the unheard of, the unprecedented, the 4th of August 1914.

Did it have to come? An event of this scope is certainly no game of chance. It must have deep and wide-reaching objective causes. These causes can, however, also lie in the errors of the leader of the proletariat, the Social Democrats, in the waning of our fighting spirit, our courage, and loyalty to our convictions. Scientific socialism has taught us to comprehend the objective laws of historical development. Men do not make history according to their own free will. But they make history nonetheless. Proletarian action is dependent upon the degree of maturity in social development. However, social development is not independent of the proletariat but is equally its driving force and

cause, its effect and consequence. [Proletarian] action participates in history. And while we can as little skip a stage of historical development as escape our shadow, we can certainly accelerate or retard history.

Socialism is the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind. For this reason, Friedrich Engels designated the final victory of the socialist proletariat a leap of humanity from the animal world into the realm of freedom. This "leap" is also an iron law of history bound to the thousands of seeds of a prior torment-filled and all-too-slow development. But this can never be realized until the development of complex material conditions strikes the incendiary spark of conscious will in the great masses. The victory of socialism will not descend from heaven. It can only be won by a long chain of violent tests of strength between the old and the new powers. The international proletariat under the leadership of the Social Democrats will thereby learn to try to take its history into its own hands; instead of remaining a will-less football, it will take the tiller of social life and become the pilot to the goal of its own history.

Friedrich Engels once said: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism." What does "regression into barbarism" mean to our lofty European civilization? Until now, we have all probably read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without suspecting their fearsome seriousness. A look around us at this moment shows what the regression of bourgeois society into barbarism means. This world war is a regression into barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization. At first, this happens sporadically for the duration of a modern war, but then when the period of unlimited wars begins it progresses toward its inevitable consequences. Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration--a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat. The future of civilization and humanity depends on whether or not the proletariat resolves manfully to throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales. In this war imperialism has won. Its bloody sword of genocide has brutally tilted the scale toward the abyss of misery. The only compensation for all the misery and all the shame would be if we learn from the war how the proletariat can seize mastery of its own destiny and escape the role of the lackey to the ruling classes.

Dearly bought is the modern working class' understanding of its historical vocation. Its emancipation as a class is sown with fearful sacrifices, a veritable path to Golgotha. The June days, the sacrifice of the Commune, the martyrs of the Russian Revolution--a dance of bloody shadows without number. [\[10\]](#) All fell on the field of honor. They are, as Marx wrote about the heroes of the Commune, eternally "enshrined in the great heart of the working class." Now, millions of proletarians of all tongues fall upon the field of dishonor, of fratricide, lacerating themselves while the song of the slave is on their lips. This, too, we are not spared. We are like the Jews that Moses led through the desert. But we are not lost, and we will be victorious if we have not unlearned how to learn. And if the present leaders of the proletariat, the Social Democrats, do not understand how to learn, then they will go under "to make room for people capable of dealing with a new world."

Chapter 8

In spite of the military dictatorship and censorship of the press, in spite of the abdication of the Social Democrats, in spite of the fratricidal war, the class struggle rises with elemental force from out of the *Burgfrieden*; [11] and the international solidarity of labor from out of the bloody mists of the battlefield. Not in the weak and artificial attempts to galvanize the old International, not in pledges renewed here and there to stand together again *after* the war. No! Now in and from the war the fact emerges with a wholly new power and energy that the proletarians of all lands have one and the same interests. The war itself dispels the illusion it has created.

Victory or defeat? Thus sounds the slogan of the ruling militarism in all the warring countries, and, like an echo, the Social Democratic leaders have taken it up. Supposedly, victory or defeat on the battlefield should be for the proletarians of Germany, France, England, or Russia exactly the same as for the ruling classes of these countries. As soon as the cannons thunder, every proletarian should be interested in the victory of his own country and, therefore, in the defeat of the other countries. Let us see what such a victory can bring to the proletariat.

According to official version, adopted uncritically by the Social Democratic leaders, German victory holds the prospect of unlimited economic growth, while defeat means economic ruin. This conception rests upon the pattern of the war of 1870. However, the flourishing capitalism following that war was not the consequence of the war but of the political unification, even though this came in the crippled form of Bismarck's German Empire. Economic growth proceeded out of unification *despite* the war and the many reactionary obstacles that came in its wake. What the victorious war contributed to all this was the entrenchment of the military monarchy in Germany and the rule of the Prussian Junkers; the defeat of France helped liquidate the [Second] Empire and establish the [Third] Republic.

But today matters are quite different in the belligerent states. Today war does not function as a dynamic method of procuring for rising young capitalism the preconditions of its "national" development. War has this character only in the isolated and fragmentary case of Serbia. Reduced to its historically objective essence, today's world war is entirely a competitive struggle amongst fully mature capitalisms for world domination, for the exploitation of the remaining zones of the world not yet capitalistic. That is why this war is totally different in character and effects. The high degree of economic development in the capitalist world is expressed in the extraordinarily advanced technology, that is, in the destructive power of the weaponry which approaches the same level in all the warring nations. The international organization of the murder industry is reflected now in the military balance, the scales of which always right themselves after partial decisions and momentary changes; a general decision is always and again pushed into the future. The indecisiveness of military results leads to ever new reserves from the population masses of warring and hitherto neutral nations being sent into fire. The war finds abundant material to feed imperialist appetites and contradictions, creates its own supplies of these, and spreads like wildfire. But the mightier the masses and the more numerous the nations dragged into the war on all sides, the more drawn out its existence will be.

Considered all together, and before any decision regarding military victory or defeat has been taken, the effect of the war will be unlike any phenomenon of earlier wars in the modern age: the economic ruin of all belligerents and to an increasing degree that of the formally neutral as well. Every additional month of the war affirms and extends this result and postpones the expected fruits of

military success for decades. In the last analysis, neither victory nor defeat can change any of this. On the contrary, it makes a purely military decision extremely unlikely and leads one to conclude the greater probability that the war will end finally with the most general and mutual exhaustion.

In these circumstances a victorious Germany would win but a Pyrrhic victory, even should its imperialistic warmongers succeed in the total defeat of all its enemies through mass murder and thus realize its audacious dream. [Germany's] trophies would be: a few beggared and depopulated territories to annex. Under its own roof would be a leering ruin. And once the stage scenery of war loan financing and the Potemkin villages [\[12\]](#) of war contracts and unshakable national prosperity are pushed aside it will be immediately seen [as the ruin it is]. It must be clear even to the most superficial observer that the most victorious state can not expect any reparations that would even come close to healing the wounds inflicted by this war. A replacement for this and a complement of "victory" would be the perhaps even greater economic ruin of the conquered side: France and England, the very countries most closely connected economically to Germany and upon whose welfare she is most dependent for her own recovery. After a "victorious" war the German people would have to pay back the war credits granted by the patriotic parliament, that is, in reality have to bear an immense burden of taxation while enduring a strengthened military reaction--the only lasting, tangible fruit of "victory."

If we seek to imagine the worst results of a [military] defeat, then, aside from the imperialist annexations, they present feature for feature essentially the same consequences as would have issued from victory. The consequences of waging war are today so deeply embedded and far-reaching in nature that the military outcome has only minimal effects upon it.

Nevertheless, let us accept for the moment, that the victorious state would understand how to throw off the burden of great ruin from itself onto its defeated opponent and to hamstring its economic development with all sorts of obstacles. Can the trade union struggles of the German working class go forward after the war if the union action of the French, English, Belgian, and Italian workers is thwarted by economic regression? Until 1870 the workers' movement operated independently in each country; sometimes key decisions were taken in individual cities. It was in Paris on whose cobblestones the battles of the proletariat were joined and decided. The labor movement of today, [because of] its more arduous daily economic struggle, bases its mass organization on cooperation [with worker movements] in all capitalist countries. If the principle is valid that the workers' cause can flourish only on the basis of a healthy, powerfully pulsating economic life, then it is valid not only for Germany but also for France, England, Belgium, Russia, Italy. And if the workers' movement stagnates in all the capitalist countries of Europe, if there exist low wages, weak unions, and slight resistance to exploitation, then it will be impossible for the trade union movement to thrive in Germany. From this standpoint and in the last analysis, it is exactly the same loss for the situation of the proletariat if German capitalism enriches itself at the cost of the French or the English at the cost of the German.

Let us turn, however, to the political results of the war. Here differentiation ought to be easier than in the economic area. Historically, the sympathies and partisanship of the socialists have been on the side fighting for historical progress and against reaction. Which side in the present war represents progress and which reaction? Clearly, this question cannot be answered on the basis of the superficial labels of the warring states, such as "democracy" or "absolutism." Rather, [the question should be judged] on

the actual objective tendencies they represent in world politics. Before we can judge what benefits a German victory would bring to the German proletariat, we must see what the effects [of such a victory] would have upon the overall shape of European political relationships.

The definitive victory of Germany would result in the immediate annexation of Belgium, as well as additional strips of territory in east and west, wherever feasible, and a part of the French colonies. The Habsburg monarchy would be preserved and enriched with new regions. Finally, Turkey, retaining a fictional "integrity," would become a German protectorate which would mean the simultaneous transformation of the Middle East into de facto German provinces, whatever the form. The actual military and economic hegemony of Germany in Europe would logically follow these results.

These results of a decisive German military victory will come about, not because they correspond to the wishes of imperialist agitators in this war, but because they are the wholly inevitable consequences emanating from Germany's position in the world and from the original conflicts with England, France, and Russia that have grown tremendously beyond their initial dimensions during the course of the war. It will suffice to put these results into context by understanding that under no circumstances will it be possible to maintain any sort of balance of power in the world.

The war means ruin for all the belligerents, although more so for the defeated. On the day after the concluding of peace, preparations for a new world war will be begun under the leadership of England in order to throw off the yoke of Prusso-German militarism burdening Europe and the Near East. A German victory would be only a prelude to a soon-to-follow second world war; and this would be the signal for a new, feverish arms race as well as the unleashing of the blackest reaction in all countries, but first and foremost in Germany itself.

On the other hand, an Anglo-French victory would most probably lead to the loss of at least some German colonies, as well as Alsace-Lorraine. Quite certain would be the bankruptcy of German imperialism on the world stage. But that also means the partition of Austria-Hungary and the total liquidation of Turkey. The fall of such arch-reactionary creatures as these two states is wholly in keeping with the demands of progressive development. [But] the fall of the Habsburg monarchy as well as Turkey, in the concrete situation of world politics, can have no other effect than to put their peoples in pawn to Russia, England, France, and Italy. Add to this grandiose redrawing of the world map power shifts in the Balkans and the Mediterranean and a further one in Asia. The liquidation of Persia and a new dismemberment of China will inevitably follow.

In the wake [of these changes] the English-Russian, as well as the English-Japanese, conflict will move into the foreground of world politics. And directly upon the liquidation of this world war, these [conflicts] may lead to a new world war, perhaps over Constantinople, and would certainly make it likely. Thus, from this side, too, [an Anglo-French] victory would lead to a new feverish armaments race among all the states--with defeated Germany obviously in the forefront. An era of unalloyed militarism and reaction would dominate all Europe with a new world war as its ultimate goal.

Thus proletarian policy is locked in a dilemma when trying to decide on which side it ought to intervene, which side represents progress and democracy in this war. In these circumstances, and from the perspective of international politics as a whole, victory or defeat, in political as well as economic terms, comes down to a hopeless choice between two kinds of beatings for the European working

classes. Therefore, it is nothing but fatal madness when the French socialists imagine that the military defeat of Germany will strike a blow at the head of militarism and imperialism and thereby pave the way for peaceful democracy in the world. Imperialism and its servant, militarism, will calculate their profits from every victory and every defeat in this war--except in one case: if the international proletariat intervenes in a revolutionary way and puts an end to such calculations.

This war's most important lesson for the policy of the proletariat is the unassailable fact that it cannot parrot the slogan *Victory or Defeat*, not in Germany or in France, not in England or in Russia. Only from the standpoint of imperialism does this slogan have any real content. For every Great Power it is identical to the question of gain or loss of political standing, of annexations, colonies, and military predominance. From the standpoint of class for the European proletariat as a whole the victory and defeat of any of the warring camps is equally disastrous.

It is war as such, no matter how it ends militarily, that signifies the greatest defeat for Europe's proletariat. It is only the overcoming of war and the speediest possible enforcement of peace by the international militancy of the proletariat that can bring victory to the workers' cause. And in reality this victory alone can simultaneously rescue Belgium as well as democracy in Europe.

The class-conscious proletariat cannot identify with any of the military camps in this war. Does it follow that proletarian policy ought to demand maintenance of the status quo, that we have no other action program beyond the wish that everything should be as it was before the war? But existing conditions have never been our ideal; they have never expressed the self-determination of peoples. Furthermore, the earlier conditions are no longer to be saved; they no longer exist, even if historic state borders continue to exist. Even before its results have been formally established, the war has already brought about immense confusion in power relationships, the reciprocal estimate of forces, of alliances, and conflicts. It has sharply revised the relations between states and of classes within society. So many old illusions and potencies have been destroyed, so many new forces and problems have been created that a return to the old Europe as it existed before August 4, 1914 is out of the question. [It is] as out of the question as a return to pre-revolutionary conditions even after a defeated revolution.

Proletarian policy knows no retreat; it can only struggle forward. It must always go beyond the existing and the newly created. In this sense alone, it is legitimate for the proletariat to confront both camps of imperialists in the world war with a policy of its own.

But this policy can not consist of social democratic parties holding international conferences where they individually or collectively compete to discover ingenious recipes with which bourgeois diplomats ought to make the peace and ensure the further peaceful development of democracy. All demands for complete or partial "disarmament," for the dismantling of secret diplomacy, for the partition of all multinational great states into small national one, and so forth are part and parcel utopian as long as capitalist class domination holds the reins. [Capitalism] cannot, under its current imperialist course, dispense with present-day militarism, secret diplomacy, or the centralized multinational state. In fact, it would be more pertinent for the realization of these postulates to make just one simple "demand": abolition of the capitalist class state.

It is not through utopian advice and schemes to tame, ameliorate, or reform imperialism within the

framework of the bourgeois state that proletarian policy can reconquer its leading place. The actual problem that the world war has posed to the socialist parties, upon the solution of which the destiny of the workers' movement depends, is this: *the capacity of the proletarian masses for action in the battle against imperialism*. The proletariat does not lack for postulates, prognoses, slogans; it lacks deeds, the capacity for effective resistance to imperialism at the decisive moment, to intervene against it during [not after] the war and to convert the old slogan "war against war" into practice. Here is the crux of the matter, the Gordian knot of proletarian politics and its long term future.

Imperialism and all its political brutality, the chain of incessant social catastrophes that it has let loose, is undoubtedly an historical necessity for the ruling classes of the contemporary capitalist world. Nothing would be more fatal for the proletariat than to delude itself into believing that it were possible after this war to rescue the idyllic and peaceful continuation of capitalism. However, the conclusion to be drawn by proletarian policy from the historical necessity of imperialism is that surrender to imperialism will mean living forever in its victorious shadow and eating from its leftovers.

The historical dialectic moves forward by contradiction, and establishes in the world the antithesis of every necessity. Bourgeois class domination is undoubtedly an historical necessity, but, so too, the rising of the working class against it. Capital is an historical necessity, but, so too, its grave digger, the socialist proletariat. Imperialist world domination is an historical necessity, but, so too, its destruction by the proletarian international. Step for step there are two historical necessities in conflict with one another. Ours, the necessity of socialism, has the greater stamina. Our necessity enters into its full rights the moment that the other--bourgeois class domination--ceases to be the bearer of historical progress, when it becomes an obstacle, a danger to the further development of society. The capitalist world order, as revealed by the world war, has today reached this point.

The expansionist imperialism of capitalism, the expression of its highest stage of development and its last phase of existence, produces the [following] economic tendencies: it transforms the entire world into the capitalist mode of production; all outmoded, pre-capitalist forms of production and society are swept away; it converts all the world's riches and means of production into capital, the working masses of all zones into wage slaves. In Africa and Asia, from the northernmost shores to the tip of South America and the South Seas, the remnant of ancient primitive communist associations, feudal systems of domination, patriarchal peasant economies, traditional forms of craftsmanship are annihilated, crushed by capital; whole peoples are destroyed and ancient cultures flattened. All are supplanted by profit mongering in its most modern form.

This brutal victory parade of capital through the world, its way prepared by every means of violence, robbery, and infamy, has its light side. It creates the preconditions for its own final destruction. It put into place the capitalist system of world domination, the indispensable precondition for the socialist world revolution. This alone constitutes the cultural, progressive side of its reputed "great work of civilization" in the primitive lands. For bourgeois-liberal economists and politicians, railroads, Swedish matches, sewer systems, and department stores are "progress" and "civilization." In themselves these works grafted onto primitive conditions are neither civilization nor progress, for they are bought with the rapid economic and cultural ruin of peoples who must experience simultaneously the full misery and horror of two eras: the traditional natural economic system and the most modern and rapacious capitalist system of exploitation. Thus, the capitalist victory parade and all its works bear the stamp of progress in the historical sense only because they create the material preconditions

for the abolition of capitalist domination and class society in general. And in this sense imperialism ultimately works for us.

The world war is a turning point. For the first time, the ravening beasts set loose upon all quarters of the globe by capitalist Europe have broken into Europe itself. A cry of horror went through the world when Belgium, that precious jewel of European civilization, and when the most august cultural monuments of northern France fell into shards under the impact of the blind forces of destruction. This same "civilized world" looked on passively as the same imperialism ordained the cruel destruction of ten thousand Herero tribesmen and filled the sands of the Kalahari with the mad shrieks and death rattles of men dying of thirst; [13] [the "civilized world" looked on] as forty thousand men on the Putumayo River [Columbia] were tortured to death within ten years by a band of European captains of industry, while the rest of the people were made into cripples; as in China where an age-old culture was put to the torch by European mercenaries, practiced in all forms of cruelty, annihilation, and anarchy; as Persia was strangled, powerless to resist the tightening noose of foreign domination; as in Tripoli where fire and sword bowed the Arabs beneath the yoke of capitalism, destroyed their culture and habitations. Only today has this "civilized world" become aware that the bite of the imperialist beast brings death, that its very breath is infamy. Only now has [the civilized world] recognized this, after the beast's ripping talons have clawed its own mother's lap, the bourgeois civilization of Europe itself. And even this knowledge is grappled with in the distorted form of bourgeois hypocrisy. Every people recognizes the infamy only in the national uniform of the enemy. "German barbarians!"--as though every people that marches out to do organized murder were not transformed instantly into a barbarian horde. "Cossack atrocities!"--as though war itself were not the atrocity of atrocities, as though the praising of human slaughter as heroism in a socialist youth paper were not the purest example of intellectual cossack-dom!

None the less, the imperialist bestiality raging in Europe's fields has one effect about which the "civilized world" is not horrified and for which it has no breaking heart: that is *the mass destruction of the European proletariat*. Never before on this scale has a war exterminated whole strata of the population; not for a century have all the great and ancient cultural nations of Europe been attacked. Millions of human lives have been destroyed in the Vosges, the Ardennes, in Belgium, Poland, in the Carpathians, on the Save. Millions have been crippled. But of these millions, nine out of ten are working people from the city and the countryside.

It is our strength, our hope, that is mown down day after day like grass under the sickle. The best, most intelligent, most educated forces of international socialism, the bearers of the holiest traditions and the boldest heroes of the modern workers' movement, the vanguard of the entire world proletariat, the workers of England, France, Belgium, Germany, Russia--these are the ones now being hamstrung and led to the slaughter. These workers of the leading capitalist countries of Europe are exactly the ones who have the historical mission of carrying out the socialist transformation. Only from out of Europe, only from out of the oldest capitalist countries will the signal be given when the hour is ripe for the liberating social revolution. Only the English, French, Belgian, German, Russian, Italian workers together can lead the army of the exploited and enslaved of the five continents. When the time comes, only they can settle accounts with capitalism's work of global destruction, with its centuries of crime committed against primitive peoples.

But to push ahead to the victory of socialism we need a strong, activist, educated proletariat, and

masses whose power lies in intellectual culture as well as numbers. These masses are being decimated by the world war. The flower of our mature and youthful strength, hundreds of thousands of whom were socialistically schooled in England, France, Belgium, Germany, and Russia, the product of decades of educational and agitational training, and other hundreds of thousands who could be won for socialism tomorrow, fall and molder on the miserable battlefields. The fruits of decades of sacrifice and the efforts of generations are destroyed in a few weeks. The key troops of the international proletariat are torn up by the roots.

The blood-letting of the June days [1848] paralyzed the French workers' movement for a decade and a half. Then the blood-letting of the Commune massacres again retarded it for more than a decade. What is now occurring is an unprecedented mass slaughter that is reducing the adult working population of all the leading civilized countries to women, old people, and cripples. This blood-letting threatens to bleed the European workers' movement to death. Another such world war and the outlook for socialism will be buried beneath the rubble heaped up by imperialist barbarism. This is more [significant] than the ruthless destruction of Liege and the Rheims cathedral. This is an assault, not on the bourgeois culture of the past, but on the socialist culture of the future, a lethal blow against that force which carries the future of humanity within itself and which alone can bear the precious treasures of the past into a better society. Here capitalism lays bear its death's head; here it betrays the fact that its historical rationale is used up; its continued domination is no longer reconcilable to the progress of humanity.

The world war today is demonstrably not only murder on a grand scale; it is also suicide of the working classes of Europe. The soldiers of socialism, the proletarians of England, France, Germany, Russia, and Belgium have for months been killing one another at the behest of capital. They are driving the cold steel of murder into each other's hearts. Locked in the embrace of death, they tumble into a common grave.

"*Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles!* Long live democracy! Long live the Tsar and Slav-dom! Ten thousand tarpaulins guaranteed up to regulations! A hundred thousand kilos of bacon, coffee-substitute for immediate delivery!"...Dividends are rising, and the proletarians are falling. And with every one there sinks into the grave a fighter of the future, a soldier of the revolution, mankind's savior from the yoke of capitalism.

The madness will cease and the bloody demons of hell will vanish only when workers in Germany and France, England and Russia finally awake from their stupor, extend to each other a brotherly hand, and drown out the bestial chorus of imperialist war-mongers and the shrill cry of capitalist hyenas with labor's old and mighty battle cry: Proletarians of all lands, unite!

END OF TEXT

FOR FURTHER READING

James Joll, *The Second International, 1889-1914* (2nd rev. ed, London, 1974)

J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*. Abridged ed. (London, 1967)

NOTES

[1] Six weeks was the time allotted for victory on the Western Front by the Schlieffen Plan. The general staff was forced to scrap the plan in October 1914, as the war of movement swiftly evolved into grinding trench warfare. [Jump back to text.](#)

[2] For three days in April 1903, Kishinev, the provincial capital of Bessarabia in the Russian Empire, was the scene of an anti-Jewish riot. According to an official report, more than fifty Jews were killed and over five hundred injured; hundreds of homes and shops were plundered and vandalized. Local authorities supported antisemitic organizations and deliberately maximized the carnage by holding back on the use of force to reestablish order. Luxemburg here uses the reference to the Kishinev pogrom and to "ritual murder"--the medieval belief that Jews used the blood of Christians, usually children, for ritual purposes--as the nadir of civilization. [Jump back to text.](#)

[3] Quoting Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). [Jump back to text.](#)

[4] At the close of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, besieged Paris revolted against the regular French government (sitting in Bordeaux). For ten weeks representatives of the working class, organized as the Commune, ruled "the capital of Europe" with an efficiency and fairness that surprised and disturbed the propertied classes all over Europe. Recouping its forces, the elected French government retook Paris in street-by-street fighting marked by wanton atrocities and destruction of property on both sides. The First International, founded by Karl Marx in 1864, was falsely accused of fomenting the Commune. Its true purpose was to unite working class parties in pursuit of the revolutionary goals first outlined in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). But doctrinal divisions and factionalism paralyzed the organization which met for the last time in Philadelphia in 1874. [Jump back to text.](#)

[5] The successor to the First International, the Second took form in 1889 and recruited most of the Social Democratic parties of Europe from its central offices in Brussels. World War I destroyed the viability of the organization, although it continued to function as the voice of moderate socialists as opposed to the more radical communist parties arrayed in Lenin's Third International or Comintern (1919-43). [Jump back to text.](#)

[6] With mobilization at the outbreak of the war, the role of the civilian sector in Germany shrank continually. The country was divided into defense sectors and commanding generals within these took over all the functions of government; they could suspend civil rights, arrest individuals under the guise of protective custody, and exercise considerable powers of censorship. Thus they were able to stifle dissent and particularly to restrict news of the military failures. [Jump back to text.](#)

[7] August Bebel (1840-1913), a rarity in the leadership of the European socialist movement, an authentic worker, singlehandedly organized the Marxist branch of the German labor movement in the 1860s and then guided it until his death. The Second Morocco Crisis of 1911 aroused fears of imminent European war. The crisis resolution entailed Germany's recognition of a French protectorate in exchange for a large, relatively worthless strip of French Equatorial Africa. While Britain strongly

supported its French ally, Germany had had to back down when its own allies showed clear unwillingness to go to war on behalf of overseas interests. Nationalists at home regarded the outcome as a humiliation, further proof that the kaiser's government was incapable of directing the drive for world power. Leftists saw the crisis as ominous proof of the intentions of militarists and imperialists. [Jump back to text.](#)

[8] Sending the German gunboat, Panther, to Agadir, a port in Morocco, was the kaiser's way of announcing his intention of protecting German interests. The symbolic attempt to preempt French designs on erecting a protectorate over Morocco was seen as a provocation and helped the conflict in interest escalate into a full-blown crisis. [Jump back to text.](#)

[9] According to legend, Wilhelm Tell and representatives of three Swiss cantons met at Ruetli in 1307 to pledge resistance against Austrian tyranny, the traditional foundation of Swiss freedom. [Jump back to text.](#)

[10] In June 1848, four months after the revolutionary overthrow of the Orleanist monarchy in France, the conservative bourgeoisie regained control of Paris amid street-fighting and great bloodshed. The defeat of the Parisian communards in June 1871 by regular French forces was accompanied by mass executions and later deportations. The Russian revolution referred to by Luxemburg took place in 1905. Briefly, working class soviets (councils) controlled St. Petersburg and Moscow, but tsarist forces were able to quell the revolutionaries and reestablish a somewhat modified autocracy. [Jump back to text.](#)

[11] The *Burgfrieden*, literally the "peace of the castle" imposed upon all those seeking shelter in a fortified spot during the Middle Ages, signified the political truce agreed upon by the political parties represented in the Reichstag at the outbreak of the war. After voting the credits that made the war financially possible, members of the Reichstag suspended further elections for the duration of hostilities and declared a cessation of "politics." Essentially, the civilian sector abdicated its responsibility to participate in policy making, leaving all major decisions in the hands of the kaiser's government and then in those of the general staff of the armed forces. This behavior contrasted sharply with that of the western democracies where, all through the war, it was "politics as usual." Only toward the end of the war, did the Reichstag reconquer some of the lost ground of 1914. [Jump back to text.](#)

[12] Count Gregory Alexandrovich Potemkin (1724-91) was said to have deceived Catherine the Great of Russia with cardboard facades of new villages he was supposed to have constructed. [Jump back to text.](#)

[13] The Herero tribesmen rebelled against German control of their homeland in Southwest Africa, 1903-07. During the brutal wars of pacification, German troops forced men, women, and children into the Kalahari desert where many perished. The extraction of rubber from along the Putumayo River was accompanied by horrifying exploitation of native laborers. [Jump back to text.](#)