Lecture five:

World War I: The breakdown of capitalism

Part 1

By Nick Beams
21 September 2005

This is the first part of the lecture “World War I: The breakdown of capitalism”. It was delivered by Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia and a member of the WSWS Editorial Board, at the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS summer school held August 14 to August 20, 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The lecture will appear in five parts. (See Part 2, Part 3, Part 4 and Part 5).

This is the fifth lecture that was given at the school. The first, entitled “The origins of Bolshevism and What Is To Be Done?” was posted in three parts on September 2, 4 and 5.

The second, entitled “Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the world war,” was posted in four parts, from August 29 to September 1.

The third, entitled “World War I: The breakdown of capitalism” was posted in parts from September 14 to August 20, 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The lecture will appear in five parts. (See Part 2, Part 3, Part 4 and Part 5).

This is the fifth lecture that was given at the school. The first, entitled “The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century” was posted in four parts, from August 29 to September 1.

The second, entitled “Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century,” was posted in three parts on September 2, 4 and 5.

The third, entitled “The origins of Bolsheivism and What Is To Be Done?” was posted in seven parts from September 6 to September 13. The fourth, entitled “Marxism, history and the science of perspective,” was posted in six parts from September 14-20. These lectures were authored by World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board Chairman David North.

In his book War and the International, first published in serial form in the newspaper Golos in November 1914, Leon Trotsky provided the most outstanding and far-sighted analysis of the war that had erupted just three months earlier. Like all the other Marxist leaders of that time, including, above all, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky was concerned with two interconnected questions: 1) the origins of the war and its relationship to the historical development of capitalism, and 2) the development of a strategy for the international working class in the face of the betrayal of the leaders of the Second International—above all, the leaders of German Social Democracy—who had repudiated the decisions of their own congresses and provided support for their “own” ruling classes on the grounds of national defence.

For Trotsky, the most pressing theoretical task, upon which all strategic and tactical considerations depended, was to locate the eruption of the war in the historical development of the world capitalist economy.

Marx had explained that the era of social revolution arrives when the “material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production.” At this point, these relations are transformed from forms of development of the productive forces into their fetters.

Herein lay the significance of the war. It announced the fact that the entire nation-state system, which had been responsible for the historically unprecedented economic growth of the previous four decades—a veritable trampoline for the leap of the productive forces, as Trotsky once called it—had become a fetter upon their further rational development. Mankind had entered the epoch of the social revolution.

“The forces of production which capitalism has evolved have outgrown the limits of nation and state,” Trotsky wrote in the very first sentence of his analysis. “The national state, the present political form, is too narrow for the exploitation of these productive forces. The natural tendency of our economic system, therefore, is to seek to break through the state boundaries. The whole globe, the land and the sea, the surface as well as the interior have become one economic workshop, the different parts of which are inseparably connected with each other.” [1]

For Trotsky, this process, now described as globalisation, had a far-reaching significance. If the ascent of mankind can be reduced to a single measure, then it is surely the productivity of labour, the growth of which provides the material basis for the advancement of human civilisation. And increased productivity of labour is inseparably bound up with the expansion of the productive forces on a local, regional and global basis. The development of the productive forces on a global scale had been carried forward at a rapid pace in the last decades of the nineteenth century under the aegis of the expanding capitalist powers.

But the process was increasingly contradictory, for, as Trotsky explained, “the capitalist states were led to struggle for the subjection of the world-embracing economic system to the profit interests of the bourgeoisie of each country. What the politics of imperialism has demonstrated more than anything else is that the old national state that was created in the wars of 1789-1815, 1848-1859, 1864-66, and 1870 has outlived itself, and is now an intolerable hindrance to economic development. The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit.” [2]

The task confronting mankind was to ensure the harmonious development of the productive forces that had completely outgrown the nation-state framework. However, the various bourgeois governments proposed to solve this problem “not through the intelligent, organised cooperation of all of humanity’s producers, but through the exploitation of the world’s economic system by the capitalist class of the victorious country, which country is by this war to be transformed from a great power into a world power.” [3]

The war, Trotsky insisted, signified not only the downfall of the national state, as an independent economic unit, but the end of the progressive historical role of the capitalist economy. The system of private property and the consequent struggle for markets and profits threatened the very future of civilisation.

“The future development of world economy on the capitalist basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions, but also against the capitalist economic organisation, which has now turned into barbarous disorganisation and chaos. The war of 1914 is the most colossal
breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions.” [4]

The use of the term “breakdown” was not accidental. It was a direct reference to the revisions of Bernstein, who had sought to remove the revolutionary heart of the Marxist program with his insistence that Marx’s “breakdown theory” had been refuted by events. Now history had delivered its verdict on the revisionist controversy. The economic tendencies that Bernstein maintained alleviated and overcame the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production had actually raised them to new and terrible heights.

This analysis of the objective historical significance of the war had immediate implications for the development of a perspective for the working class. There had to be a complete break with the nationalist and gradualist politics of the Second International. Against those who maintained that the first task of the working class was national defence, after which the struggle for socialism could resume, Trotsky explained that the working class could have “no interest in defending the outdated and antiquated national ‘fatherland,’ which has become the main obstacle to economic development.”

The central theme running through all of Trotsky’s analysis was his insistence that the development of imperialism and the eruption of war signified the birth of a new epoch in the development of human civilisation.

“Imperialism,” he wrote, “represents the predatory expression of a progressive tendency in economic development—to construct human economy on a world scale, freed from the cramping fetters of nation and state. The national idea in its naked form, as counterposed to imperialism, is not only impotent but also reactionary: it drags the economic life of mankind back to the swaddling clothes of national limitedness.” [5]

The development of imperialism and the eruption of war were the contradictory expression of the fact that a new form of social organisation in the making, struggling to be born. Consequently, there could be no return to the ante-bellum status quo, for that epoch had passed into history.

The only way to meet the “imperialistic perplexity” of capitalism was by “opposing to it as a practical programme of the day the socialist organisation of the world economy. War is the method by which capitalism, at the climax of its development, seeks to solve insoluble contradictions. To this method, the proletariat must oppose its own method, the method of the social revolution.” [6]

It can be said, without fear of exaggeration, that from the very outset of the war all the ideological and political resources of the capitalist ruling classes had been concentrated on one essential point: to refute the Marxist analysis that the eruption of the First World War signified the historical bankruptcy of the capitalist system and the necessity for its replacement by international socialism in order to take forward the rational development of mankind’s productive forces.

In the heat of the conflict itself, bourgeois politicians on all sides sought to place responsibility for the war on their opponents: for the British politicians, the war was the outcome of German aggression, which led to Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality; for the German ruling classes, the issue was Russian barbarism and the attempts of the other powers to deny Germany’s legitimate place in the world economic order; for the French bourgeoisie, the war was fought against German oppression, notwithstanding France’s alliance with Tsardom. At its conclusion, the victors attempted to absolve themselves of responsibility for the conflagration by writing into the Treaty of Versailles the “war guilt” clause affixing responsibility on Germany.

For the US historian turned president, Woodrow Wilson, the responsibility for the war lay in the political methods of the nineteenth century, based on the so-called balance of power, secret diplomacy and alliances. Wilson’s analysis was motivated, at least in part, by his understanding that if capitalism were to withstand the shock of the war, a new perspective making an appeal to democracy and freedom would need to be advanced. Significantly, as he was preparing the famous Fourteen Points on which he was to base American efforts to reorganise the post-war order and make the world safe for democracy, Wilson made a study of Trotsky’s booklet War and the International.

In the aftermath of the war, the British war-time prime minister, Lloyd George, attempted to absolve all the bourgeois politicians of blame for the conflagration. It arose almost inadvertently, something of a muddle. No one at the “head of affairs quite meant war” in July 1914, he explained. It was something into which they “glided, or rather staggered and stumbled.” He was to repeat this argument in his memoirs of the war. “The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay.” Nobody wanted war. [7]

More than nine decades on, the question of the origins of World War I still has immediate relevance and significance. The reason is not hard to find. It lies in the fact that, as the American historian and foreign policy analyst George F. Kennan put it, the war was “the great seminal catastrophe of this century.” The routinised killing in the trenches, in which wave after wave of young men—some of them little more than boys—were repeatedly sent “over the top;” ushered in a new epoch of barbarity and the death of millions.

What are the origins of this catastrophe? Are they rooted in the capitalist mode of production itself? If so, does this not establish the necessity for the abolition of capitalism? These issues have lost none of their significance. The reason lies in the fact that, in the words of the eminent French historian Elie Halevy, “the world crisis of 1914-18 was not only a war—the war of 1914—but a revolution—the revolution of 1917.” The revolution was not simply a product of the war. It was conceived by its leadership as opening the way forward for the development of mankind out of the barbarism into which it had been plunged by the capitalist ruling classes.

To be continued

Notes:

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