

As 2014 begins

Geo-political tensions raise spectre of 1914 Great War

6 January 2014

It is surely a sign of deepening global political tensions that the *Financial Times*, one of the world's leading newspapers, chose to start the New Year with an editorial entitled "Reflections on the Great War", drawing parallels between the present situation and that which led to the catastrophe 100 years ago.

As the editorial noted, in January 1914, few Europeans could have imagined that just seven months later "their political and military leaders would plunge the world into a cataclysmic war", resulting in tens of millions of deaths and casualties over the next four years.

While offering the reassurance that "there is no reason to fear that the world is on the edge of such an epochal disaster"—no doubt, something similar would have been said in January 1914 had the question been raised—the editorial nevertheless noted that "there are some disquieting similarities between then and now."

The *Financial Times* was not the only newspaper to draw a parallel between the geo-political relations of 2014 and those of a century ago.

In a comment published on January 2, British *Daily Telegraph* economic columnist Ambrose Evans-Pritchard referred to the return of the "spectre of 1914." He noted that New Year predictions, while never easy, were "nigh impossible in the midst of a global regime change with so many political bombs primed to go off at any moment."

Likening China's imposition of an Air Defence Identification Zone in attempt to challenge Japan's claims to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea to the German Kaiser's disputes with France "to test Britain's response before the First World War," he continued: "Asia's two great powers are on a quasi-war footing already, one misjudgement

away from the chain of events that would shatter all economic assumptions."

In the "brave new world of 2014," Evans-Pritchard continued, it was no longer "Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History', but history returning in tooth and claw."

The two newspaper articles are among many such commentaries comparing the deepening conflict between the US and China to the tensions between Germany and Great Britain in the lead-up to the outbreak of World War I.

Warning that the friction of rival nationalisms and historical grievances were "no less capable of causing war today than they were in 1914", the *Financial Times* noted that "the risks are especially acute if the international system is being reordered by the rise of new great powers and the relative decline of old ones." A century ago Germany was seeking its "place in the sun" at the expense of the British empire. Now, increasing tensions in the East China Sea between Beijing and its neighbours, which rely on US support, "recall Germany's strained relations with Britain, France and Russia before 1914."

Such commentaries, which seek to assign "blame" for the war on Germany's efforts to disrupt the existing "international order"—confirming the old adage that history is written by the victors—and which liken Germany's alleged responsibility to similar efforts by China today are a falsification both of the historical record and the present situation.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his brilliant pamphlet *War and the International*, written in 1915, while the imperialist antagonists in World War I sought to blame the war on their opponents, in order to rally their populations to the banner of "defence of the fatherland", the real cause of the war lay in the

contradictions of the global capitalist system as a whole.

The four decades leading up to the outbreak of World War I had seen rapid economic expansion and the establishment of a world economic system. But this process, what we now term globalisation, had immensely heightened a fundamental contradiction between the global advance of mankind's productive forces—a truly progressive development—and the system of rival nation-states and great powers in which the capitalist system is rooted.

The capitalist governments, Trotsky wrote, sought to overcome this contradiction not by 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.” The war, in essence, represented “the most colossal breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions.”

The conflict between the US and China is the most significant expression of the fact that the contradictions that gave rise to World War I are re-emerging.

Notwithstanding the attempts of imperialist propagandists to liken it to the Kaiser's Germany, China is not an imperialist power. It operates within a world economy and financial system dominated by the imperialist powers, the US above all.

However, its very economic growth, as part of a new phase of globalisation, has raised again, in an even more explosive form, the contradiction between the global development of the productive forces and the reactionary and outmoded nation-state system.

As in the lead-up to World War I, the imperialist powers are preparing to plunge humanity into another catastrophe, under conditions where nuclear conflagration will take the place of the horrors of the trench warfare 100 years ago.

The *Financial Times* editorial insisted that it was incumbent on “governments and peoples to commemorate the outbreak of the first world war with dignified ceremonies and respect for the dead, but also with sober consideration of the lessons to be drawn from the catastrophe of 1914-18.”

In fact, what is being planned is a glorification of imperialist violence as one of the essential ideological preparations for a new war.

In Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron has called

for the anniversary to be turned into a “celebration” like the Queen's Diamond Jubilee last year, which was accompanied by bunting, Union Jack flag-waving and street parties. Some £50 million has been allocated for “national commemorative events” that will capture “our national spirit.”

In Australia, hundreds of millions of dollars are to be spent in a four-year-long extravaganza, which, in the words of Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott, supported to the hilt by the Labor Party opposition, will be a “people's celebration” of the “extraordinary episode in which perhaps more than at any time in our history, Australia impacted on the world.”

Despite its insistence on the need to draw the lessons of the catastrophe of 1914, the *Financial Times* editorial does not rule out a new world war. A “final lesson” to be drawn is that “if war does break out, it is vital at its conclusion to construct a secure peace.”

The only “peace” at the conclusion of a third world war, the conditions for which are rapidly maturing, will be the silence of death and a nuclear winter.

The international working class must draw its own lessons and make its independent preparations. As Trotsky wrote: “War is the method by which capitalism, at the climax of its development, seeks to solve its insoluble contradictions. To this method the proletariat must oppose its *own* method, the method of the social revolution.”

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