

The armistice of November 11, 1918 and the lessons for today

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Yesterday marked the 100th anniversary of the armistice which finally brought an end to World War I. Nothing like it had ever been seen in human history—a bloody inferno costing the lives of more than ten million soldiers and six million civilians with millions more permanently maimed, disfigured and injured.

But the silencing of the guns, in what was later to be falsely labelled as the “war to end all wars,” was not the end of the bloodshed and carnage. It was simply the conclusion of the first phase of what was to become a thirty-year international war between the major capitalist powers—the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan and their allies for control and domination of the world—that only came to an end in 1945, culminating in the dropping of two atomic bombs by the US on Japan.

In war, it has often been said, truth is the first casualty. And so it is the case here. The war of 1914–18 was not fought, as claimed by British imperialism—presiding over the greatest empire the world had ever seen—to defend the right of small nations against the depredations of Germany. Nor was it fought, as claimed by the German imperialists, to counter the barbarism of Tsarist Russia. Neither was it fought as claimed by France, allied with the Tsarist regime, to defend republican ideals against Prussian autocracy. And least of all was it a war to “make the world safe for democracy,” the fraudulent claim advanced by President Woodrow Wilson as the United States entered the conflict in April 1917 in order to ensure that the interests of rising American imperialism were advanced in the division of the spoils.

The war was waged for markets, profits, resources and spheres of influence. But this conflict itself did not simply arise from the political outlook of the various imperialist politicians. It had deeper roots in the very development of the capitalist economy. As Leon Trotsky explained, in words that ring out even more powerfully in today’s era of globalised production, the foundations of the war were to be found in the objective contradiction between the development of world economy and the division of the world into rival capitalist nation-states and imperialist great powers.

Each of the imperialist powers sought to resolve this contradiction through a bloody struggle to decide which of them would become the hegemonic world power. That conflict was to finally result—after three decades of barbarism, involving economic devastation, fascism, the Holocaust of European Jewry and the mass slaughter of World War II—in the domination of US imperialism.

But the contradictions of world capitalism were not overcome. They were only temporarily subsumed under the domination of the United States. The disease which had gripped the global capitalist system was not cured, it only went into a period of remission. This period has now ended.

The very development of global capitalism after 1945 has brought about the relative and absolute decline of the United States. Confronted with the resurgence of its old rivals in Europe and Asia and the emergence of a potential new challenger in the form of China it now prepares to wage world war. And all the other imperialist powers are on the same road.

Germany, heading once again for conflict with its opponent in two world wars, the US, must seek to “organise Europe” under its leadership. In seeking to militarily rearm as a great power, the German ruling elite is seeking to whitewash the crimes of German imperialism, including those of the Nazi regime. Across the continent, the ruling classes are promoting extreme right-wing and fascist movements as they seek to create social a base for their policies of militarism and austerity.

In the US, the Trump administration has designated Russia and China, two nuclear-armed powers, as “strategic competitors,” declaring that “great power competition” not terrorism is the primary focus of US national security. It has scrapped the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in order to prepare for war against Russia and China while in France President Macron has called for the building of a European army to confront not only Russia and China but if necessary the United States.

These and many other warning signs—not least the creation of innumerable flashpoints from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the South China Sea to North East-East Asia—point to the acute danger of the eruption of World War III, which would assume a nuclear dimension from its very outset.

This clear and present danger is rooted in the fundamental problem that now confronts mankind: how to free the vast productive forces which its labour has created from the destructive grip of capitalist social relations based on private ownership of the means of production and the division of the world into rival nation states and imperialist great powers.

But as Marx once explained, no great historical problem ever arises without at the same time the material conditions also arising for its solution. And as the devastation of World War I was unleashed, that solution emerged in the form of the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the first successful conquest of power

by the working class. The perspective that animated Lenin and Trotsky, the leaders of that revolution, was that the toppling of Tsarism in Russia was to be the opening shot of the world socialist revolution.

The war, they insisted, arising from the breakdown of the capitalist system, signified the dawning of a new epoch in mankind's historical development: an epoch of wars and revolutions. "A permanent revolution versus a permanent slaughter: that is the struggle, in which the stake is the future of man," Trotsky wrote.

The perspective of the Bolsheviks, that the program of world socialist revolution had been placed on the order of the day as an immediate necessity, has since been dismissed by historians, including those with a "left" standpoint sympathetic to the Russian Revolution, as somehow utopian, unrelated to the course of actual events.

In fact, it was thoroughly realistic, grounded on an objective appraisal of the situation throughout all the major European countries as the opposition to the mass slaughter and the depredations of war assumed revolutionary dimensions, above all in the country of the largest and most politically decisive working class, Germany.

The German ruling high command only sued for peace, leading to the armistice, under the 14-point program advanced by Wilson—a document itself only developed in January 1918 in response to the Russian Revolution two months earlier and the call by the new Soviet government for the European working class to end the war through socialist revolution—out of fear of being overthrown.

In publishing the secret treaties from the archives of the Tsarist regime, the Bolshevik government ripped to shreds the lies on which the war had been based, showing it to be waged solely for profits and imperialist plunder. The leaders of the European powers were prepared to continue to bleed the continent white and would not have agreed to the armistice without the effect of the Russian Revolution.

As the so-called Peace Conference in Paris, called on the basis of the armistice, began, the British Labour Party Fabian leader Beatrice Webb summed up the issue that confronted the leaders of the European powers. "Are we to be confronted with another Russia in Austria, possibly, even in Germany—a Continent in rampant revolution," she wrote.

The American journalist Ray Stannard Baker, closely associated with the Wilson entourage, noted that for the participants at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which had concluded the Napoleonic Wars, revolution was behind them while "at Paris it was always with them."

In the event, the threat of revolution was pushed back and the bourgeoisie remained in the saddle above all due to the fact that the leaders of the parties of the working class betrayed the revolutionary upsurge. In Germany, the Social Democracy formed a counter-revolutionary alliance with the military high command and the leading industrialists to behead the revolution of November 9, 1918.

The capitalist ruling classes remained in power. But as the Bolsheviks had warned they did not bring peace and democracy.

Rather the armistice immediately saw the beginning of a counter-revolution against the working class. The origins of both Mussolini's fascist movement in Italy and the Nazi movement in Germany are to be found here. The enormous dislocation caused by the war, further exacerbated by the undemocratic Versailles Peace Treaty of June 1919, was a key factor in the further development of economic breakdown that was to set off the Great Depression in 1929, producing a decade of economic devastation leading to the eruption of the Second World War in 1939.

In its analysis of the contemporary geopolitical situation, the International Committee of the Fourth International has advanced the concept of the "unfinished twentieth century." The struggles with which the twentieth century opened are still being fought out, assuming even more acute forms. This epoch remains one of war and revolution.

The bourgeois leaders, together with their scribes and pundits, in looking back to the events of World War I, call for lessons to be learned. But they are organically incapable of presenting an objective appraisal because their assessment of history is inextricably bound up with their present-day material interests and concerns.

Thus French President Macron, embroiled in a deepening conflict with the "America First" agenda of the Trump administration, criticises Trump's "nationalism" in one breath, and praises Marshal Petain, the head of the Nazi-backed wartime Vichy regime in France, with another.

The *Financial Times*, the voice of British financial capital, now embroiled in a conflict with Germany over the terms of the UK exit from the European Union, repeats the old lie that World War I was simply about Germany's attempt to assume dominance over the European continent, as if the struggle by British imperialism to maintain its vast empire had nothing to do with it.

For the international working class, the lessons that must be learned are those drawn by the revolutionary socialist movement a century ago and which today form the foundation of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution. These lessons are that the era of national programs has ended and that the only way of averting the devastating maelstrom of war into which capitalism is threatening to once again plunge mankind is through the perspective of world socialist revolution. This program must be advanced, developed and actively fought for, not as some distant objective but as the only viable and realistic program of the day.

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