THE PROSPECT OF INTER-IMPERIALIST WAR by Phil Sharpe

The tension between Russia and the USA in relation to the situation in the Ukraine has led Workers Power to comment: “What we are seeing is the development of a pre-war period in Europe more dangerous than the 40 year NATO versus Warsaw Pact standoff. It is beyond irony that our rulers should embark on this strategy as they mark the centenary of the First World War.”(1) This conclusion is an inaccurate assessment of the present economic and political situation as this article will attempt to explain. The international tensions caused by the Ukrainian situation will not result in what could be described as World War Three. This is because the present phase of capitalist development is radically different from that of yesterday. The tensions that led to World War One and World War Two are not evident and instead the situation is defined by the tendency towards cooperation between the major imperialist powers. Furthermore devastating war would not be tolerated by the population of the leading capitalist countries and the threat of barbarism would truly usher in the prospect of socialist revolution. Hence World War is out of the question. Instead diplomatic measures will be utilised in order to resolve the recent tensions. In order to explain these comments it is necessary to compare the present period with that which led to two world wars and the cold war.

The development of the First World War was brilliantly explained by Bukharin and Lenin as the result of inter-imperialist contradictions caused by the rivalry between conflicting forms of nationally based monopoly capital.(2) The result was the formation of colonial empires, and tension between the rising power of Germany in comparison to declining British imperialism. The struggle to re-divide the world would ultimately take the form of war. It is also important to recognise that world war was a direct form of class struggle because the international working class became divided between rival nation states and the Second International collapsed because of its failure to uphold a principled anti-war position. The beginning of the war led to mass enthusiasm and the erosion of class consciousness. It was the revolutions of 1917 that promoted the possibility to revive the internationalism of the working class. Prolonged slaughter in the trenches and the harshness of the war economy led to an anti-war sentiment and led to support for the Russian revolution. Inter-imperialist war had created the conditions for proletarian revolution. This was why the ruling class of USA, France and the UK became cautious about the generation of a new inter-imperialist war. They became supporters of peace at any price, or alternatively wanted other nations to wage war against the USSR. However the calculations of the ruling class of the Allied powers was upset by the formation of the fascist powers of Italy and Germany. They were determined to challenge the existing balance of power because of an ideology of war and conquest, and in order to overcome the second rate status established at the Treaty of Versailles.(3) The result was the re-development of inter-imperialist tensions that could only temporarily be resolved by appeasement. This situation led to the Munich Pact and the granting of German imperialist aims in return for peace. Trotsky explained why this Pact would result in war: “The initiative for the new re-division of the world this time as in 1914 belonged naturally to German imperialism. Caught off guard, the British government first attempted to buy its way out of war by concessions at the expense of others (Austria, Czechoslovakia). But this policy was short-lived. “Friendship” with Great Britain was only a brief tactical phase for Hitler. London had already conceded Hitler more than he calculated on getting. The Munich agreement which Chamberlain hoped to seal a long-time friendship with Germany led, on the contrary, to a hastening of the break. Hitler could expect nothing more from London – further expansion of Germany would strike at the life lines of Great Britain herself. Thus the “new era of peace” proclaimed by Chamberlain in October 1938 led within a few months to the most terrible of all wars.”(4) Trotsky concluded that this world war was not for national defence, or in favour of democracy against fascism, and instead the only principled perspective was that of international revolution as the basis to oppose the conflict. This perspective was generally correct, but was to be complicated by the rapid German occupation of Europe which meant it became principled to support the resistance of the people of the conquered countries.

In other words the inter-imperialist contradictions of the first world war had never really been resolved and so were rapidly re-generated in the conditions of the economic crisis of the 1930’s and the victory of Fascist regimes. It also has to be remembered that the militant struggles of the working class in the 1930’s meant the war was also considered as a means to subordinate the working class to the aims of the national ruling class. War was considered as a means to undermine the militant struggles of the French working class in particular. Trotsky remarks that the mass support of the masses for the First World War was absent with the outbreak of World War Two: “The experience of the First World War did not pass without deeply affecting the masses. The Second International drew its strength from the still almost untouched democratic and pacifist illusions of the masses. The workers seriously hoped that the war of 1914 would be the last war. The soldiers allowed themselves to be killed in order to spare their children a new slaughter. Only thanks to this hope could men have withstood war for more than four years. Today almost nothing remains of the democratic and pacifist illusions. The people are suffering the present war without any longer believing in it, without expecting more from it than new chains. This applies also to the totalitarian states. The older generation of the workers who bore on their backs the burden of the first imperialist war and who have not forgotten its lessons are still far from eliminated from the arena. In the ears of the next to the oldest generation, which went to school during wartime, the false slogans of patriotism and pacifism are still ringing. The inestimable political experience of these strata who are now crushed by the weight of the war machine will reveal itself in full force when the war compels the toiling masses to come out openly against their governments.”(5)

This analysis was true to the extent that the horrors of war had become understood by the working class and so the chauvinism of the First World War was absent during the second. But what Trotsky underestimated was that the conception of a war for democracy and war against fascism would become popular in the Allied countries. The working class of the Axis powers was motivated by a war for survival and fear of the USSR under the regime of Stalin. In other words people went to war but with an understanding of the full extent of its horrors. This sentiment was intensified by the fact that this was the first war that involved the civilian population because of blanket bombing by aircraft. Civilians had become ‘legitimate targets’ of warfare. Consequently when the war ended the international sentiment of all populations was that this should really be the end of world war based on weapons of mass destruction. This feeling was intensified by the generalised revulsion felt about the dropping of the atom bombs. The genocide of war created the popular understanding that fascism should never come to power within society. Fascism was finished as a state force because of its terrible effects during the war. Yet within three years the cold war had begun. This represented a process based on the super-power rivalry between the USA and USSR, and did not express the mood and activity of the working class. The French and Italian Communist Parties were popular and initially the USA had accepted the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. It was probably the introduction of Marshall Aid within the West that emphatically began the Cold War. (6) Churchill had ideologically prepared for cold war with his iron curtain speech in 1946, but this did not have immediate political effect. But the Soviet recognition that the extension of Marshall Aid to the Eastern bloc would mean the end of its domination led to a process of structural assimilation. (7) It could be argued that the Cold War resulted in the erosion of socialist culture in the West and led to the support of capitalism within the working class based on the Social Democratic settlement of the 1945 period. But the horror of war never abated and this understanding was based on the fact that any future war between the USSR band the USA would become nuclear. The Vietnam War only intensified this horror of the war because of the genocide carried out by American troops and the bombing of North Vietnamese cities. The result was the formation of the most popular and effective anti-war movement in history. The role of this movement was to provide essential solidarity to the liberation forces. The legacy of the opposition to the Vietnam War has been that when any intervention by a Western imperialist power has been proposed the response has been to create an anti-war movement. Thus the intervention in Iraq in 2003 led to massive demonstrations in Europe and America. It could be argued that most of the people in the West were still pro-war but not in any jingoistic manner, and they also desired a rapid end to war. Indeed it could be argued that the development of any foreign adventure by Western imperialism results in an anti-war response. This means that the major powers have to be cautious about their military action. The impulse to war can create the development of opposition to militarism which could become the basis of the regeneration of socialism.

Hillel Ticktin has outlined a perceptive analysis of the relationship between war and capitalism in relation to Iraq 2003 in the following manner: “It is of course true that capitalism has been warlike since its beginning. It ethnically cleansed areas of the globe. As Marx pointed out, it came into being dripping with blood from head to foot. It is also true that capitalism has become more belligerent in its decline, with increasingly tragic and potentially fatal consequences for the human race. That does not mean that war is an ever-present part of the armoury of the ruling class and that it is relatively easy for the governments of the dominant nations to resort to it.

This provides the context in which war can take place. It does not explain this war. We should note that the means of warfare have evolved to the point that wars between capitalist powers have become unlikely because of the possibility of the total destruction of life. War is, therefore, only possible in scaled down version with and between third world powers.

As long as capitalism exists, there will be wars. Fortunately, the means of warfare have paradoxically exceeded the bounds of their use. This is obvious when we speak of nuclear weapons or so-called weapons of mass destruction in general, but it has been true for some time, that much of modern weaponry can be so destructive that full scale warfare, even without WMD, would itself constitute a horrific war crime. As a result only limited forms of warfare are now usable. A small, weak country like Iraq was therefore an ideal enemy, for this reason alone. The fact that this regime was oppressive and generally hated made an attack either acceptable or at least tolerated by substantial sections of the population in the USA and UK.”(8)

The point that can also be made is that if small wars like that in Iraq can result in mass movements of opposition the response to a nuclear war would be to create a horrified population that would act to overthrow the remnants of the capitalist system. It is for this reason that nuclear weapons can never be used. The very idea of war between counties with sophisticated infrastructure is abhorrent to all of humanity, and as a result America has to assert its domination in a different manner. Even the limited unilateralism of the Bush doctrine led to protests within the American ruling class. Joseph Nye has written an important book in which he rejects an American strategy of military conquest.(9) The point he is making is that military action not only results in resistance and unrest, but it is also at odds with economic objectives in a world of globalisation in which the role of the market decides who is economically influential. American can gain more by acting in accordance with globalisation than with carrying out ill considered military adventures, even if military action cannot always be ruled out. (10) This perspective has generally been carried out by the Obama administration which has revived the multilateral approach towards international relations, and has been cautious about making military interventions in conflict areas like Syria and Iraq. Hence it is not surprising that the tensions between America and Russia about the Ukraine have only resulted in sanctions and have not led to the prospect of war. Indeed we can argue with virtual certainty that war will not occur between these two imperialist powers, and ultimately some type of international settlement is likely in order to try and resolve the problems of the Ukrainian situation. Thus the diplomatic tensions are temporary and are capable of being settled because the ultimate interests of the contending powers are not about the escalation of tensions. Instead the imperatives of globalisation provide important economic reasons why the disputes between imperialist powers should be resolved in the interests of world trade. This point is especially pertinent in a period of recession of the capitalist system.

In contrast Workers Power argues that the situation is similar to that which Lenin was confronted with in the early 20th century: “Once again, several imperialist great powers confront one another. They organise blocs and alliances whose final shape and composition are not yet clear, but the deadly threat they pose to the working class and oppressed nations is clear enough.”(11) It is not complacent to contend that this perspective is unrealistic and not credible. The point is not that the various imperialist powers are not capable of military confrontation between each other but rather they lack the interests that would motivate such a possibility. Instead the imperialist powers hold grand summits in which they discuss the economic and political problems of the moment and try to develop common strategies for trying to resolve outstanding issues. In the last analysis the major capitalist countries have a common interest in trying to overcome the present recession, reviving production and trade, and in opposing common enemies like the Islamic state organisation. Workers Power ignore the significance of these events and instead can only envisage the prospect of confrontation. In the last analysis major war cannot be considered to be impossible but it is unlikely for the reasons given. It is important to recognise that the most dynamic and ascending capitalist and imperialist power, which is China, desires stable political conditions without tensions in order to further its expansionist interests such as investing in Africa and Latin America. China also has close economic relations with America that would only be disrupted by war. In general, economic considerations on an international scale are primary and contrast favourably with the alternative problem of the barbarism that would result from war between the imperialist powers. This is an important reason why war is limited in the contemporary era to that between major capitalist countries and third world forces. These wars are often for the purpose of political stability and lack primary economic reasons.

Instead of this sober assessment of the situation, Workers Power claim that we are in a transitional period before major conflict will occur: “We are in a situation before any direct clashes between the imperialist powers (how long this may last is impossible to say) but one in which the imperialist powers are tolerating clashes between various surrogates and fomenting bogus revolutions within their opponents states or amongst their allies.”(12) This claim is based on the conception of war between a Russian and Chinese bloc with the Western Alliance. We would argue that this perspective is very unlikely for the reasons given. The people of all the countries involved in this so-called conflict do not want war and would be likely to resist the horrors that war would bring. Indeed it could be argued that inter-imperialist war would revive the prospect of revolution. However we can maintain with confidence that inter-imperialist war will not occur because it would be an event that was opposed to the logic and character of the world economy. In contrast, the world wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 occurred because of the division of the world into rival empires and areas of exploitation. Political antagonism was an expression of this economic antagonism. In contrast the contemporary era has led to an end of competing spheres of interest and instead the whole world is open for exploitation by the major multinational companies. However in the unlikely event that inter-imperialist war should occur we agree with Workers Power that it would not be principled to support any side. Instead we would uphold an internationalist and defeatist standpoint. We believe that this approach would revive mass support for world revolution.

However this is the most important point to make. Inter-Imperialist war will not occur because the ruling class of the major countries know that its occurrence will regenerate the possibility of revolution. Hence it would be highly irrational and fool-hardy to embark on this type of war when the gains are ephemeral and the risks are great. Any re-division of the world in accordance with the gains of the victors would be out-weighed by the possibility of revolutionary developments in both the major imperialist powers and in the Third World. The Third World would resent any attempt at re-colonisation, and the people of the imperialist powers would oppose the mass casualties that would be the result of the war. Furthermore, people throughout the world would be horrified by the prospect of the escalation of war into a nuclear conflict which would pose the prospect of the very end of human civilisation. Indeed it could be argued that the ruling class of the imperialist powers are themselves revolted by the threat of war. This is why the official propaganda is composed of many TV and radio programmes about the futility of the First World War. One hundred years since the beginning of the First World War has led to searching questions about whether it was worthwhile.

None of the above means that we should compromise our support for genuine struggles of opposition to imperialist oppression, and we should not support the standpoint that humanitarian imperialist intervention is principled. But we need to reject the alarmist view that an inter-imperialist war is imminent and instead continue to oppose the wars that imperialist powers are carrying on in the Third world. The central point is that predictions which have little relationship to reality do not prepare the forces of a revolutionary organisation for the class struggle and instead create a world of illusions. Like Plato’s cave of illusions it is difficult to get out of the false reality of appearances. Instead of justifying a false perspective we should try to develop an understanding of the world as it is as the basis for our programme. This would involve an acknowledgement of how the world has changed since 1945, and recognition that the very hegemonic role of America means that the character of inter-imperialist contradictions has changed. The domination of the USA has truly created a more open world economy which would be undermined and disrupted by major military conflict. Instead the aim of American imperialism is to contain the various contradictions without the resort to major war. Furthermore the possible antagonists of America like Russia and China do not want war because they can also gain from globalisation. In other words the structural constraints of the present world economy should determine our perspectives and so lead to a rejection of making assertions about the imminence of a major inter imperialist military conflict.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)League for the Fifth International Editorial (Dave Stockton) NATO Summit Lays Plans for a New Cold war Number 15 Autumn 2014 p5

(2)Nikolai Bukharin: Imperialism and World Economy, Merlin Press, London 1972, and Vladimir Lenin: Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966

(3)R. Palme Dutt: World Politics 1918-36, Victor Gollancz, London 1936

(4)Leon Trotsky: Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution, In Selected Writings, 1939-1940 Pathfinder Press, New York, 1973 p187

(5) ibid p218-219

(6)Chris Harman: A People’s History of the World, Bookmarks, London, 1999 p543-576

(7)Tim Wolthforth: The Theory of Structural Assimilation, Fulrose books, Oxford, 1974

(8)Hillel Ticktin: The US War on Iraq and the World Economy, in Critique 35, 2004 p27-28

(9)Joseph Nye: The Paradox of American Power, Oxford University Press, 2002

(10ibid p7-8

(11)LFTFI op cit p5

(12) ibid p6