TROTSKY AND THE PROGRAMME OF PEACE

INTRODUCTION

Trotsky's programme of peace, which he outlined as a response to the First World War, has been neglected because it apparently contradicted Lenin's conception of revolutionary defeatism. This neglect is unfortunate because it is Trotsky's approach which has become more relevant that Lenin's in relation to developing a principled response to imperialist inspired wars. It also has to be mentioned that Trotsky's analysis of the causes of the First World War was very similar to that of Lenin. He agreed with Lenin about how the economic development of world capitalism had outgrown the limitations of national states, and this contradiction was the impetus for international tension and war. Furthermore, he outlines in detail how the German Social Democrats failed to develop a principled response to the war which meant that the Second International collapsed into rival national fragments. Trotsky also establishes that the internationalist traditions of German socialism were rejected by this process of opportunist degeneration. It would seem that Trotsky was establishing the theoretical basis of principled opposition to the war from a Marxist standpoint. Yet Lenin objected vehemently to his position. It is important to outline the reasons for Lenin's rejection of Trotsky's position.

Lenin outlined his objections in a concise manner in his article: 'The Peace Programme'. (1) He maintains that the primary ideological inspiration for the policy of peace is Kautsky, who substitutes peace as an alternative to a revolutionary approach for understanding and opposing the war. He argues explicitly that the standpoint of peace is opposed to the prospect of obtaining the support of workers for the revolutionary struggle against war. In this manner, the Kautskyite peace programme represents and 'strengthens bourgeois influence on the proletariat'. (2) Lenin's position is based on the view that peace will not alter the development of the politics that led to war. Instead: “War is the continuation, by violent means, of the politics pursued by the ruling classes of the belligerent powers long before the outbreak of war. Peace is a continuation of the very same politics, with a record of the changes brought about in the relation of the rival forces by military operations. War does not alter the direction of pre-war policies, but only accelerate their development.”(3)

Lenin's critique of Kautsky's peace programme is relevant in terms of the fact that Kautsky did utilise it in order to gloss over the national chauvinist degeneration of the Second International. But this criticism cannot apply to Trotsky who connects his perspective of peace to opposing the regression of the Second International. Trotsky attempts to connect the aim of peace to the revolutionary struggle of the working class, and so in that manner his standpoint is not an opportunist diversion from the requirements of the class struggle. Furthermore, Lenin is criticising the policy of peace from the perspective that the power of imperialism increases in both periods of war and peace. But he does not consider that in the situation of inter-imperialist war the demand for peace acquires revolutionary dimensions. Only the international class struggle can realise a principled peace and end the inter-imperialist war. In this manner the establishment of peace will bring about the advance of the possibility of socialism. Lenin would reply to this argument and maintain that the outcome of inter-imperialist war can only be either the consolidation of capitalism via conquest, or the progress of revolution. 'Democratic' possibilities like peace are an illusion. He contends: “Owing to the objective situation, the present war cannot on the basis of bourgeois relations lead to any democratic “progress”, whatever its outcome, this war can do nothing but intensify and extend oppression in general, and national oppression in particular.”(4) This point is valid if the working class do not intervene to influence the outcome of the war. But if the international working class acts to realise peace, the situation dramatically changes. Imperialism will be weakened and the forces of progress and socialism will be strengthened.

Instead of recognising the possibilities of the struggle for peace, Lenin replies that in the present: ‘all phrases about a democratic peace are a bourgeois lie, the objective purpose of which is to divert the workers from the revolutionary struggle for socialism.'(5) This reasoning is dogmatic and would only have validity if the peace was imposed by various imperialist powers against the interests of others. Which is why the Versailles peace was reactionary. But if peace is the outcome of the struggle of the working class it can have only a progressive content, and therefore represents the potential to promote the attempt to realise socialism. Lenin is making a valid point when he maintains that the demand for peace made by Kautsky is hypocritical and is disguising the opportunism of the Second International. But this situation does not mean that the aspiration for peace is also unprincipled. Furthermore, Lenin's claim that Trotsky capitulates to Kautsky's opportunism is untrue, as we shall explain. To suggest that Trotsky deceives the workers with his perspective is a false claim made by Lenin. Instead Trotsky's approach corresponds with what Lenin outlines is a principled peace programme: “The “peace programme” of Social Democracy must, in the first place, unmask the hypocrisy of the bourgeois, social chauvinist and Kautskyite talk about peace. This is the first and fundamental thing. Unless we do that we shall be, willy-nilly, helping to deceive the masses. Our “peace programme” demands that the principal democratic point – the repudiation of annexations - should be applied in practice, and not in words, that it should serve to promote internationalism and not of national hypocrisy.”(6)

Lenin concludes his article with suggesting that the peace programme should be consistent with the aim of socialist revolution: “Whoever promises the nations a democratic peace without at the same time preaching the socialist revolution, or while repudiating the struggle for it – a struggle now during the war – is deceiving the proletariat.”(7) We will attempt to indicate that Trotsky's approach does correspond to Lenin's criteria of what represents principled politics. His standpoint is that the revolutionary class struggle takes the initial form of the attempt to realise peace without annexations. This successful end to imperialist war will not immediately bring about the overthrow of capitalism, but it will mean progress in these terms. The realisation of peace by the actions of the working class will make this class more confident and aware of the importance of revolutionary struggle and socialism. Hence the balance of forces will be changed in favour of opposition to capitalism and the forces of reaction will be weakened. Most importantly the connection of peace with socialism will promote the development of a proletariat that has become conscious of its historic class aims. It will have overcome the sense of powerlessness caused by the onset of war, and instead will have gained a new sense of confidence of what is possible because of this historic defeat of the forces of international imperialism. In this context, the Russian revolution of February 1917 was the beginning of the successful struggle for peace, which potentially could culminate in international revolution. Interestingly, the Bolsheviks during 1917 made little mention of revolutionary defeatism and instead their propaganda emphasised the aspiration of peace. This showed in practice that the approach of Trotsky was vindicated.

Thus Lenin's effective position that peace could not be realised without proletarian revolution was not confirmed in reality. Instead in a partial manner the growing unrest of the working class contributed to the ending of the First World War. This development meant the situation was being prepared for the intensification of the class struggle. However, it also had to be admitted that the victors in the First World War were able to impose an onerous treaty on the defeated. The First World War undermined but did not result in the demise of capitalism. Nevertheless the appeal of the Bolsheviks to the international working class was based on the slogan of peace. In contrast, revolutionary defeatism seemed to be irrelevant, and little mention was made of this tactic. Thus, in practice Lenin accepted the superiority of Trotsky's peace perspective. However, this situation was obscured in the future because Trotsky adopted Lenin's position of revolutionary defeatism. This became the orthodox view of the Fourth International. Consequently, this article is an attempt to re-establish the importance and significance of Trotsky's peace programme. In this context we would argue that this perspective is relevant for the class struggle of the present. The realisation of peace is an integral aspect of the struggle for socialism.

WAR AND THE INTERNATIONALISM

Trotsky introduces his pamphlet with an analysis of the present situation of capitalist development. He outlines how the international development of the productive forces is restricted by the political limits of the nation state. The result is imperialist expansion and the creation of the conditions for war. This situation also means that the conditions are being created for revolution and socialism: “Capitalism has created the material conditions of a new socialist economic system. Imperialism has led the capitalist nations into historic chaos. The war of 1914 shows the way out of this chaos by violently urging the proletariat onto the path of revolution.”(8) This comment indicates that his approach is identical to that of Lenin. The only resolution of the conflict of imperialist war is to adopt the strategy of revolution. Thus in order to understand the differences that Trotsky has with Lenin is about the issue of tactics. But in terms of overall perspective they have effective agreement. Hence for Lenin to suggest that Trotsky has agreement with Kautsky is a complete caricature. Kautsky upheld the standpoint of peace in order to avoid the necessity of supporting the strategy of proletarian revolution. In contrast, Trotsky is explicitly in favour of the approach of revolutionary struggle and is against any suggestion of defence of the given imperialist state. Instead he concludes that the inter-imperialist war means: “In these historical circumstances, the working class, the proletariat, can have no interest in defending the outlived and antiquated national “fatherland”. The task of the proletariat is to create a far more powerful fatherland, with far greater power of resistance – the republican United States of Europe, as the foundation of the united states of the world.”(9)

This comment actually indicates that Trotsky had a more principled standpoint then Lenin, who accommodated to the view that the revolutionary process was primarily national in its dynamics. In contrast, Trotsky was emphatic that the political conclusion of the international development of the productive forces should be world revolution, which will take the form of the united states of Europe. Furthermore, Trotsky emphasises this view when he outlines his perspective in the following terms: “The only way in which the proletariat can met the imperialist perplexity of capitalism is by opposing to it as a practical programme of the day the socialist organisation of world economy.”(10) He also outlines his internationalist standpoint in terms of indicating the responsibility that Russian Tsarism has for the development of inter-imperialist war, and reject any sympathy for the imperialist aims of this regime. Instead he upholds the view that the aim of principled Russian Marxists is revolution, which will be part of the European revolution.

Thus these comments explicitly indicate that Trotsky has a perspective that is similar to that of Lenin. If anything, Trotsky is more principled because he connects his standpoint to the dynamics of international revolution and rejects any conciliation of 'socialism in one country'. Trotsky also shares Lenin's view that it is necessary to criticise the opportunism of the Second International and German Social Democracy. He outlines that the support of the various parties of the international for their nation state meant the effective collapse of this organisation, and he is especially critical of the fact that German Social Democracy has capitulated and become supporters of the imperialist war. He rejects Kautsky's diplomatic efforts to maintain the Second International and instead maintains: “All efforts to save the Second International on the old basis, by personal diplomatic methods and mutual concessions, are quite hopeless.”(11) The implication is that the 'fossilized' old shell of the Second International has to be replaced by a new international that will be more principled and able to oppose regression into national opportunism, and instead express the re-birth of revolutionary ideas: “It is not socialism that has gone down, but its temporary historical external form. The revolutionary idea begins its life anew as its casts off its rigid shell.”(12) He also confirms this point when he emphasises that 'the old socialist parties have become the main hindrance to the revolutionary movement of the working class.”(13) He confirms this aim when he concludes his introductory section with the view that: “But the entire book, from the first to last page, was written with the idea of the New International constantly in mind, the New International which must rise up out of the present world cataclysm, the International of the last conflict and the final victory.”(14)

Trotsky develops a historical analysis of the relationship of the situation in the Balkans to the development of the inter-imperialist war. He contends that the various outstanding national questions are subordinated to the importance of a European revolution as the only progressive outcome of the war. This analysis means that he does not deny the significance of the national question, but he agrees with Lenin that its present importance is secondary in the actual conditions of international war. Trotsky also elaborates the view that German Social Democrats cannot justify their support for the war because Germany is in opposition to reactionary Russian Tsarism, because Germany is also in alliance with the equally reactionary state of Austro-Hungary. The policy of the German Social Democrats has changed because initially they also recognised the reactionary character of its alliance with Austria. However, this attitude has been completely transformed with the outbreak of war. Trotsky outlines what should be a principled policy for German socialists to adopt: “And most important of all, a democratic Germany....could easily without the Hohenzollens and the ruling Junkers, come to an agreement with France and England and could isolate Czarism and condemn its foreign and internal policies to complete impotence. A policy directed towards this goal would indeed be a policy of liberation for the people of Russia as well as Austro-Hungary. But such a policy requires an essential condition, namely that the German people, instead of entrusting the Hohenzollens with the liberation of other nations, should set about liberating themselves from the Hohenzollens.”(15)

Thus Trotsky has outlined the perspective of what a principled Social Democratic standpoint should be. He suggests that the Social Democrats should aim to overthrow their reactionary government in order to carry on the process of revolutionary war. This approach would mean that a revolutionary administration in Germany would also attempt to assist the overthrow of the reactionary monarchies of Austro-Hungary and Russia, and promote the national independence of Poland and the development of a Balkan federation of peoples. He makes no mention of the relationship of Germany to France and Britain in this context, but the implication is that revolutionary war would be carried out against them if they came to the assistance of the reactionary monarchies. This elaboration of Trotsky's approach means that under the concrete conditions of what is required in order to advance the interests of the forces for socialism, he is not reticent to support Lenin's tactic of revolutionary defeatism. In other words he considers that the overthrow of the German Hohenzollens could promote the beginning of European revolution and express the development of opposition to imperialist war. Instead of this principled policy, the Social Democrats supported the German monarchy, and upheld a policy of defence of the reactionary nation state. They refused to adopt the only principled stance, which was to work for the overthrow of the existing state formation in order to promote a more progressive balance of class forces, or to advance the prospect of success of the European revolution. Only the German Social Democrats are presently in a position where they can transform the situation by militant action. Their intransigence could inspire the working class to oppose the regime and to facilitate its overthrow. Instead the Social Democrats are supporting the regime and the imperialist war effort. This opportunism has meant that inter-imperialist war is inevitable, and the forces of reaction have been strengthened on an international scale.

Trotsky explains this opportunist situation in terms of the defence of a nationalist standpoint, and a connected rejection of genuine internationalism. In his opinion the only principled standpoint is to advocate the development of a struggle to overthrow reactionary governments in order that they cannot embark on war. However, once the war has started the assumption is that tactics will have to be modified by the changing circumstances. This will mean that the emphasis becomes that of ending the war in terms of the successful realisation of peace. The immediate overthrow of various reactionary governments becomes premature in these circumstances. Instead the most appropriate basis to advance the aims of revolutionary struggle and socialism will be connected to the realisation of peace. In other words the period before the development of war had offered favourable opportunities for the German Social Democrats to try and overthrow the reactionary regime. This period has come to an end. Thus it might be necessary to adopt different tactics if the struggle against war is to occur. In this context the primary immediate aim of the international working class will be for peace and an end to military hostilities. This aspiration should be respected by the advocacy of a peace programme. The period in which reactionary governments can be overthrown has ended in the given situation of war, and so it is necessary to advocate different tactics. In contrast, Lenin's rigid advocacy of defeatism indicates that he is not basing his tactics on the concrete situation, or understanding what is possible under the given conditions. The onset of war means that the only feasible principled policy is an advocacy of peace.

The German Social Democrats justify their opportunist stance in terms of opposing Russian Czarism. But the monarchy of Germany has no interests in overthrowing a similar type of regime. Its war aims may imply the military defeat of Russia, but not the promotion of democracy. Furthermore, the major opponent of the aims of Germany is republican France. Also Trotsky is emphatic that whilst the victory of Germany over Russia will not necessarily advance or strengthen the forces of revolution in Russia, he is definite that the major result will be to militarily strengthen Germany. Indeed he predicts that if revolution occurred in Russia under these circumstances, the military forces of Germany would attempt to overthrow the new regime, and might succeed in this aim. Trotsky does not recommend the role of military defeats, and the tactic of defeatism, as the basis to promote revolution. Instead he suggests that the victory of Germany over Russia, and by implication France, would mean that: “Germany's new policy, which began with the capitulation of the party of the proletariat to nationalistic militarism, would be strengthened for years to come. The German working class would feed itself, materially and spiritually, on the crumbs of the table of victorious imperialism, while the cause of the social revolution would have received a mortal blow.”(16) Consequently: “That in such circumstances a Russian revolution, even if temporarily successful, would be an historical miscarriage, needs no further proof.”(17)

It could be argued that Trotsky perspective is pessimistic, and did underestimate the possibility of revolution occurring under conditions of military defeat. But he is aware that the defeat of one country means the victory of another, and so would imply that the strength of the triumphant imperialist power would increase under these circumstances. Thus to desire defeat of a given power within the imperialist war does not necessarily promote the success of revolution. Instead it could result in the strengthening of the powers of reaction. But Trotsky is also implying that the working class of a given nation is unlikely to desire the defeat of its country in order to promote the possibility of revolution. Instead the more progressive and realistic tactic is to advocate peace. If international working class solidarity realises peace, this situation would represent the most promising basis to strive for socialism. In contrast, defeat for the given imperialist nation will have uncertain prospects. The immediate and definite outcome will be the strengthening of the military might of the victorious imperialist power. Such a situation is unlikely to advance the cause of revolution. It could be argued that the very October revolution of 1917 refuted Trotsky's approach. But in fact Bolshevik propaganda during 1917 was in favour of peace, little mention was made of defeatism. The revolution became popular because it promised an end to Russia's involvement in the First World War. However, this situation did strengthen Germany, and so the Brest Litovsk treaty was necessary in order to end the threat of German invasion of Russia. Trotsky's approach was generally confirmed. Where Trotsky is in error is in predicting the ultimate development of the alliance of Czarism with the German monarchy as an alliance of reaction.

The major point that Trotsky is making is that the task of the overthrow of Tsarism is the responsibility of the Russian working class and not that of German imperialism. Indeed this had been the standpoint of German Social Democracy until the outbreak of war. Therefore whilst Trotsky rejects defeatism because it implies the victory and strengthening of an opposing imperialist power, he is still in favour of the working class striving to overthrow its reactionary state formation. Hence he rejects defeatism but has not repudiated the importance of revolutionary struggle. Thus Trotsky's repudiation of the wisdom of defeatism as a tactic is no sense unprincipled. Instead he is concerned that the advocacy of defeatism may unintentionally promote or glorify the success of a given imperialist power to the detriment of a rival. H is suggesting that there are more constructive and principled tactics by which the aim of revolutionary struggle can be promoted.

Trotsky outlines in detail how the German Social Democrat justification of a war of national defence is spurious. The German military has engaged in a war of offensive tactics, and it could also be argued that France and Britain have similar aims. Sometimes it is possible to support a war because of its defensive aspects, but the central question that has to be answered is the following: “What is of fundamental importance to us socialists is the question of the historical role of the war. Is the war calculated to effectively promote the productive forces and the state organizations, and to accelerate the concentration of the working class forces? Or is the reverse true, will it act as a hindrance? This materialistic evaluation of wars stands above all formal or external considerations, and its nature has no relation to the question of defence or aggression.”(18) In this context, the war is reactionary because it can only result in the undermining of the productive forces, and therefore upholds the restrictions of the nation state on the economic dynamics of the world economy. But crucially, the war results in the working class of one nation being opposed to the proletariat of another. The character of the war cannot promote international solidarity. This aim can only be enhanced by ending the war, and connecting the aim of peace with that of socialism. Hence this war is not connected to the progressive role of bourgeois revolution, or the aim of national emancipation. Instead, as in relation to Germany, victory in the war means territorial gains and the realisation of its ability to conquer other nations. But primarily, the ideological effects of war would mean the advance of the struggle of the German workers would be undermined in a serious manner: “The class struggle of the proletariat would then be placed upon the imperialist hegemony of Germany, the working class would be interested in the maintenance and development of this hegemony, and revolutionary socialism would be condemned to the role of a propagandist sect.”(19)

Hence if the German working class support the war they will no longer have the sense of political independence from the bourgeoisie, and instead they will become passive supporters of the existing capitalist and imperialist system. In this context they will not be able to uphold a vanguard role of leading and promoting the international revolution. They will not be able to begin the European revolution. Instead they will represent the capitulation of the international working class to the aims of imperialism. Therefore the reactionary action of German Social Democracy will mean that the progress of the forces of revolution will have been undermined. The result is the outbreak of inter-imperialist war which means that the direct struggle for European revolution becomes modified by Trotsky with the aim of peace. The Social Democrats justify their stance in terms of supporting a war of national defence, but this view is an illusion because Germany engages in continual aggressive actions. The tactics of Germany are offensive, as indicated by the invasion of Belgium. Trotsky also criticises Kautsky's accommodation to the view that the standpoint of Social Democracy should be decided in terms of the criteria of national defence or offense. This is because he outlines how inter-imperialist war involves both these aspects, and so the only principled internationalist and socialist position is to oppose the war. In contrast, the opportunist standpoint of the Social Democrats is to support unconditionally their government in a situation of war, and to define this justification in terms of national defence. Hence any political criticism of the government by Social Democracy was repudiated and instead they adopted a servile attitude. This meant responsibility for the actions of an antagonistic class was undertaken by the Social Democrats. The opportunist stance of the party meant that it was no longer a party of opposition; instead it had adopted the aims of government. This reactionary role meant it was not possible to agitate for European revolution as the rejection of the development of imperialist war.

However, in a vague manner Trotsky equates a principled anti-war stance with the aim of realising genuine national independence. This standpoint is not elaborated in satisfactory terms. Instead he outlines in a brief manner how the independence of nations is connected to the advance of international solidarity. Surely, it would be more explicit and precise to suggest that only proletarian revolution can advance the possibility of national self-determination. In this manner, Lenin approach is more definite and explanatory. However, Trotsky does express the view that the most principled manner in which to uphold the national integrity of Germany is by the unity of the working class, such as that between German and Russian workers. Instead the opportunism of German Social Democracy in supporting imperialism means that the Russian working class is more likely to support its own nation state against Germany. Thus Trotsky is trying to suggest that the genuine interests of a nation are upheld by the struggle for revolution and democracy. The problem with this formulation is that it could become possible to also justify the opportunist approach of national defence in these terms. The point is that the character of the nation is intimately connected with that of imperialism and capitalism. It is also problematical to define the nation under socialism as being progressive. Hence instead of supporting national independence as the alternative to the imperialist view of the nation, it would be more principled to explicitly connect international revolution with the aim of national liberation.

Possibly the reason for Trotsky's vague position is that he is aware that the German Social Democrats refused to sign a pledge supporting the national integrity of France, and so implied that they would support an offensive against this country. Thus what he is implying is that internationalism would have been advanced if the various parties of the Second International had signed a united pledge to uphold the national independence of the potential rival nations. This may have been a principled tactic to try and undermine the development of war. Trotsky is aware that war cannot be opposed by an immediate attempt to struggle for power. Instead it is both principled and sufficient if a Marxist party votes in the Parliament against war and this standpoint would have been the beginning of rallying the population to an anti-war stance. However, this stance did not occur, and instead the parties of the Second International capitulated to national imperialism. Even the propaganda task of opposing the war in order to prepare for more practical action did not materialise. In this manner the Second International became the opponents of proletarian revolution.

Consequently, Trotsky's analysis is similar to that of Lenin. He criticises the national chauvinist capitulation of the Second International, and in particular that of German Social Democracy. He is also aware of the centrist vacillations of Kautsky, even if he does not outline them in detail in contrast to Lenin. But, primarily he is in favour of revolutionary struggle against the war. The major difference is that he is critical of the perspective of defeatism, and outlines its possible reactionary consequences. Instead international revolutionary solidarity does not necessitate the approach of defeatism, and he implies that the working class of any given nation will not desire the victory of a foreign imperialist power. Thus the logic of his position is that the working class will support a peace policy in order to bring about an end to the war, and to therefore support the progress of the class struggle towards the objective of socialism. Consequently, he differs with Lenin concerning tactics and not strategy. Furthermore, he agrees with Lenin's analysis of the development of the inter-imperialist war and suggests that the only progressive outcome is world revolution. One difference he has with Lenin is that he emphasises that if it had been principled, German Social Democracy could have led the struggle against war. In contrast, Lenin explains why this was not going to occur. Lenin is more emphatic about the general corrupting role of imperialism in relation to the undermining of the principled politics of the Second International. Despite their differences, Lenin and Trotsky shared a similar outlook. It was a caricature to describe Trotsky as a centrist like Kautsky, which was Lenin's view.

Trotsky was aware of the importance of the long historical period which shaped German Social Democracy and gradually transformed it from a Marxist party into a reformist one that adapted to the interests of the state. He outlines this process of degeneration and connects it to the decline in the class consciousness of the workers who also adapted to the imperialist aims of the German state. The result of this development was support for Germany in the world war. The only alternative to this situation is the revival of revolutionary Marxism. What has occurred is that the ideas of the ruling class become adopted by the Second International and by the working class in the form of accommodation to nationalism. But the terrible character of war is creating the basis to radicalise the workers. They will recognise that only struggle can change the political situation, and this recognition will go alongside the fact that war results in terrible hardship and poverty. In this context the dynamic of war can either result in a temporary peace brought about by the mutual exhaustion of the belligerent powers, or else a decisive peace realised by the militant action of the international working class: “Immediate cessation of the war is the watchword under which the Social Democracy can reassemble its scattered ranks, both within the national parties and the whole international. The proletariat cannot make its will dependent on the strategic considerations of the general staffs. On the contrary, it must oppose its desire for peace to these military considerations. What the warring governments call a struggle for national self-preservation is in reality a mutual national annihilation. Real national self-defence now constitutes the struggle for peace.”(20)

This comment of Trotsky is outlining the revolutionary character of the struggle for peace. This is because he opposes a reactionary peace imposed by the various participants in the war, and contrasts it with the progressive peace that is realised as a result of the application of the 'fight to preserve the revolutionary energy of the proletariat'(21) It is obvious that if the international proletariat consciously organises together in order to strive for peace, and succeeds in achieving this aim, the result will be to promote the development of class struggle and to make the prospect of socialism more likely and credible. To realise a progressive peace would mean to impose on the imperialist powers a form of peace without annexations or reparations, it would uphold the right of nations to self-determination, and promote the aim of the United States of Europe. This would be a Europe without standing armies, and therefore the power of the reactionary social forces has been seriously weakened. Lenin would argue that this approach ignores the view that socialism can only be advanced by civil war, and the importance of the tactic of revolutionary defeatism. But Trotsky is making the point that few people would be attracted by this approach. Instead millions can be mobilised in order to bring about a progressive peace. This mass movement would not be a digression from the struggle for proletarian revolution, and instead would represent the capacity to bring about the realisation of democratic aims which could be the prelude to the success of international socialism.

Trotsky is making the point that workers will not automatically and immediately mobilise in favour of revolution. Instead they will be increasingly prepared to act to realise peace and end the terrible warfare that is taking place. The attainment of peace in this manner can only promote the possibility of making further advances towards socialism. In other words a peace that is brought about by the solidarity of the proletariat can only enhance its sense of international power, and so make it increasingly receptive to strive to complete this struggle in the form of European revolution. Hence the peace perspective of Trotsky cannot be an opportunist mistake that ignores the complexity and difficulty involved in bring about the successful transformation of society. Instead his approach is firmly within the realistic situation of the present, and connects with the increasing yearning of the people of Europe for peace. He wants to translate this yearning into mass action and a definite programme of peace. He believes that a popular movement for peace, and its success, can only bring nearer the realisation of his democratic demands and their connection to socialism. Furthermore, he is emphatic that this process is different from an annexationist peace imposed by the victors in the imperialist war. Instead he is explicit that only a peace without annexations can advance the cause of world socialism.

A development of a conscious movement that will transform the aim of peace into a democratic programme, which if realised can advance the struggle for socialism. The problem with Lenin's approach is that mass support for the tactic of revolutionary defeatism is not likely to become popular. Instead the mobilisation of the masses for revolution is far more likely to take the form of the struggle for peace. Revolutionary Marxism should encourage this development, and provide a democratic programme for the realisation of a progressive peace.

Trotsky defends this position in the following manner: “The revolutionary Social Democracy need not fear it will be isolated, now less than ever. The war is making the most terrible agitation against itself. Every day that the war lasts will bring new masses of people to our banner, if it is an honest banner of peace and democracy. The surest way by which Social Democracy can isolate the militaristic reaction in Europe and force it to take the offensive is by the slogan of peace.”(23) The very character of the war is creating the demand for peace, and in this manner Social Democracy can re-establish its connection with the working class. Therefore if a peace programme is developed and propagated the principled role of Social Democracy can be renewed. This standpoint is also the principled alternative to the national defencism and pro-imperialism of the leadership of the Second International. They support war rather than peace, and so the advocacy of a peace programme can indicate the opportunist limitations of the social chauvinists.

The following comment outlines Trotsky's connection between the struggle for peace and the call for a new Third International: “The peace agitation, which must be conducted simultaneously with all the means at the disposal of the Social Democracy ….will not only tear the workers out of their nationalist hypnosis; it will also be the saving work of inner purification in the present official parties of the Second International, who have been exploiting the influence that socialism has acquired over the working masses for national militaristic aims, must be thrust back into the camp of the enemies of the working class by uncompromising revolutionary agitation for peace.”(24) He is making the point that the opportunist and chauvinist character of the parties of the Second International is caused by their support for imperialist war. Therefore the struggle for peace will be the most effective manner in which this unprincipled politics can be outlined, and an alternative developed in political and organisational terms. He emphasises this point with the further comment that: “The revolutionary epoch will create new forms of organization out of which inexhaustible resources of proletarian socialism, new forms that will be equal to the greatness of the new tasks.”(25)

Therefore the differences with Lenin are limited to the issue of tactics, and the different emphasis given to the peace programme. Lenin is obviously not against peace, but considers that it will only realistically be possible with the explicit advance of revolution. To Trotsky this approach is dogmatic and ignores the opportunity to relate to the aspiration for peace caused by the terrible character of the imperialist war. This spontaneous desire for peace can be related to a principled Marxist programme that connects the issue of peace to a democratic and socialist programme. Therefore Trotsky is not adopting the approach of Kautsky, who adapts to the limitations of the standpoint of national defence. Instead he has revolutionary intentions, but he accepts that this perspective should be connected to the popular consciousness of the moment. In this context the development of a militant struggle for peace can realise a progressive peace without annexations, or a peace that has weakened the power of imperialism. In this manner the aim of socialism will have been advanced. Thus peace is not an expression of a pacifist illusion that is a digression from the tasks of socialist revolution. Instead the aim of peace connects with socialism, and represents how the class struggle can develop and promote the aim of overthrowing capitalism.

THE ZIMMERWALD MANIFESTO

Trotsky's version of the Zimmerwald Manifesto outlines the horrors of imperialist war, and indicates how it undermines the progress of humanity. The democratic rights of the people have been ended, and this situation is because the various socialist parties have refused to carry out their obligations to oppose the inter-imperialist war. These parties have compromised the principle of the political independence of the working class, and instead accepted the interests of the various bourgeois governments. These parties have assumed responsibility for the war, and as a result they have failed to begin the struggle for peace. This aim must mean: “This struggle is the struggle for liberty, for brotherhood of nations, for socialism. The task is to take up the fight for a peace without annexations or war indemnities. Such a peace is only possible when every thought of violating the rights and liberties of of the nations is condemned. There must be no enforced incorporation either of wholly or partly occupied countries. No annexations, either open or masked, no forced economic union, made still more intolerable by the suppression of political rights. The right of nations to select their own government must be the immovable fundamental principle of international relations.”(26)

These demands indicate that the only basis to realise them is by the development of a mass movement of the working class. The possibility to enact these measures would mean that the imperialist powers had been weakened by the actions of the popular movement. Instead of a predatory peace they would be forced to implement measures that represented the democratic aspirations of the working class. The role of imperialism would have been compromised and instead the principles of the international solidarity of working people would be realised despite the opposition of the ruling class. Lenin might argue that this programme represents a diversion from the revolutionary struggle. This is a dogmatic view. Instead Trotsky is articulating in a progressive manner what most workers desire after the development of imperialist war. This is the aim of peace, but he connects this spontaneous aspiration with the democratic programme of revolutionary Marxism. He is outlining that if peace is realised in a principled manner or in terms of an effective defeat for the interests of imperialism, it can represent the prospect of making progress toward socialism. Hence he is not unconditionally calling for a peace that would express the aims of the victorious imperialist powers. Instead he is advocating a peace that would represent the interests of working people and the oppressed nations. This type of peace would express the potential for making advances towards socialism. In contrast, the call for revolutionary defeatism or civil war would not correspond to the existing class consciousness of the workers. Instead the horrors of war have led to the increasingly popular desire for peace. Marxists need to connect with this sentiment and relate to it in the form of elaborating demands that represent the potential to connect peace with the aim of socialism. In concrete terms this means calling for peace without annexations. In this manner peace would mean the dynamics of imperialist activity had been undermined by working class solidarity. Therefore the balance of forces would become in favour of the interests of socialism. In contrast little popular support can be obtained for the tactics of revolutionary defeatism and civil war. This standpoint represents revolutionary phraseology rather than an attempt to connect with the immediate consciousness of the working class. What is necessary is to relate the universal desire of peace with the democratic programme of Marxism, and in this manner create the possibility of advance towards socialism.

In other words the programme of peace is the most principled and effective means by which the working class can reject its accommodation to the opportunist approach of support for national defence of imperialism. The role of class collaboration is replaced by the struggle for peace in the most democratic terms. Ending the war by the mass action of the international working class implies that the ability of imperialist nations to conduct war can be overcome by cooperative struggle. This development would represent a tremendous victory for the workers and the aims of socialism. However, the Bolsheviks considered that this manifesto did not outline an explicit expression of the tactics of proletarian struggle in the era of imperialist war: “The manifesto adopted by the Conference does not give us complete satisfaction. It contains no pronouncement on either open opportunism, or opportunism that is hiding under radical phraseology, the opportunism which is the chief cause of the collapse of the international but which strives to perpetuate that collapse. The manifesto contains no clear pronouncement as to the methods of fighting against the war.”(27)

This criticism is unfair on both instances. It is explicit within the Manifesto that the perspective of national defence of the given imperialist power is unprincipled and opportunist. This standpoint represents a betrayal of the international interests of the working class. Thus by implication, all those that accommodate to this position, such as Kautsky’s centrism, are also accepting the validity of the position of national defence. However, this point is not made explicitly, but it is implied in the analysis. In relation to the question of tactics this criticism is both unfair and inaccurate. The tactics outlined in the manifesto are those of a struggle to realise a peace programme. Thus the manifesto is categorical that it is both feasible and possible to appeal to the international working class in a principled manner in terms of advocating and developing a struggle for peace. The war must be ended in terms of the progressive list of demands outlined by the Manifesto. To suggest that this approach lacks tactical validity is ludicrous. But adoption of the peace programme means that the contrasting tactics of revolutionary defeatism and civil war are being rejected. To disagree with an opponent does not mean that they lack any conception of tactics. Instead they uphold tactics which the Bolsheviks oppose as being an expression of opportunism. But we can agree with Trotsky that the character of tactics must be those which can be immediately supportable by the working class. In this sense the question of peace meets this criterion. The development of the most terrible war, and the universal decline of social conditions, means that peace has, or will become, the universal demand of the working class. In these circumstances the most appropriate task for the Marxists is to provide this aspiration of peace with a progressive and anti-imperialist content. This aspect is outlined in terms of demands such as peace without annexations. In this manner the demand for peace is part of a democratic programme that if implemented will advance the process of the realisation of socialism. Thus the demand for peace has a genuinely revolutionary content. It is not a digression from the class struggle and instead is an indispensable aspect of how mass activity is both initiated and advanced in the present period. The successful realisation of a principled peace will promote socialism.

The lessons of that period mean the issue of peace is a legitimate and principled aspect of the struggle for socialism. We have to develop our form of the peace programme that is relevant for the present, and which can develop support within the working class. In practice the peace programme was promoted during the 1917 October revolution. The alternative of revolutionary defeatism proved to be irrelevant. Hence the revolution was integrally connected to the struggle for peace. This situation was the ultimate refutation of the position of Lenin. However, there was one contradiction of Lenin’s Peace Programme outlined in his 'Letters From Afar' in March 1917.(28) He outlined how he would advocate the waging of war in order to realise peace: “For these peace terms the Soviet of Workers Deputies would, in my opinion agree to wage war against any bourgeois government and against all the bourgeois governments of the world, because this really would be a just war, because all the workers and toilers in all countries would work for its success.”(29) This standpoint was effectively rhetoric rather than sound tactics. The necessity of the Brest Litovsk treaty indicated the lack of a desire to fight against imperialism. Instead the Bolsheviks were able to agitate for peace as the alternative to imperialist war. In this manner they developed their popularity on an international scale. Peace does not undermine the objective of socialism, only in the period of Stalinism was peaceful co-existence utilised in order to oppose international revolution. But Trotsky showed how a principled peace programme could be connected to the aims of socialism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Vladimir Lenin: The Peace Programme, in Collected Works Volume 22, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964

(2) ibid p163

(3) ibid p163

(4) ibid p163

(5) ibid p163

(6) ibid p167

(7) ibid p168

(8)Trotsky, War and the International Marxist Internet Archive, 2017 p2

(9) ibid p3-4

(10) ibid p4

(11) ibid p5

(12) ibid p5

(13) ibid p6

(14) ibid p6

(15) ibid p15

(16) ibid p20

(17) ibid p20

(18) Section 2, page 8

(19) ibid p17

(20) Section 3 p14

(21) ibid p14

(22)Lenin: Bourgeois Pacifism and Socialist Pacifism, in Collected works volume 23 p175-194

(23)Trotsky op cit p15

(24) ibid p15

(25) ibid p16

(26)Zimmerwald Manifesto p20 (section 3)

(27) ibid p21

(28)Lenin Letters From Afar, Collected Works volume 23 p333-339

(29) ibid p338