

The First World War: Slaughter and Resistance

Megan Trudell

The First World War is much written about and romanticised, both for its horror and its sense of the ‘community of the trenches’. Historical accounts of the war has been increasingly of the revisionist variety over the last few years. Recent books include a biographical rehabilitation of Field Marshal Douglas Haig, Commander of the British Expeditionary Force from 1915 to the end of the war and a reconsideration of the Battle of the Somme as a crucial ‘learning curve’ for British officers.¹ In Britain, the Tory government is pushing for a ‘celebration’ of the war that captures in the words of David Cameron, ‘our national spirit’, emphasising national unity and downplaying the horror and the ghastly cost of the war on the human beings who fought it and their families. Above all, the forms of commemoration aim to write out class conflict and revolution which were the central features of the war and which united national and international working classes, despite the divisions of nationalism and war. They posed a critical threat to the system that had given birth to such terrifying slaughter.

A war embedded in the system

The war was a catastrophe on a previously unimagined scale. It was the first major war involving all of Europe since 1815, and through the colonies of the Great Powers engaged in it, drew in soldiers from across the globe. For the first time, war involved the mass of the populations of the countries which fought it: 65 million men

were mobilized and millions more had their working and home lives transformed by the demands of a new, industrialised warfare. The war also had an enormous impact on the shape of the world. As historian Jay Winter has said, ‘The 1914-1918 conflict created the fundamental elements of 20th century history’.²

When the war began, much of the globe was divided by vast empires: the Russian, Austria-Hungarian and Ottoman empires dominated central and eastern Europe. By the time the war came to an end, they had fragmented into several nation states, revolution had swept across Europe, and nineteenth century certainties - of the patterns of economic power, the political organisation of states, of class structure, ideology and culture, were blown away.

The redistribution of power by the victorious Allies at the Paris Peace Conference in Versailles in 1919 established the fault-lines that still destabilise the world. The war in the Balkans in the 1990s, and continual tension and conflict in the Middle East can be seen as the ‘chickens of Versailles coming home to roost’, as Eric Hobsbawm put it. Other aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century history that we take for granted, such as the domination of the United States as the world’s most powerful economy, the decline of Britain as a world power, the fight for the survival of the Russian workers’ state and its subsequent destruction, the more devastating Second World War and the increasing pattern of mechanised wars against civilians, the tensions today in the Ukraine are all direct or indirect consequences of the First

¹See Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army*, (London, 2011), and William Philpott *War of Attrition: the Great War for Peace*,(New York, 2014).

²J Winter and B Blaggett, *1914-18* (BBC Books, 1996), p10

World War and its aftermath.



The human cost of the First World War was enormous. Those who fought on every side paid a heavy price. About 10 million people were killed or died as a result of the war. On average over 5,600 soldiers were killed on every day of the war. Twenty one million were wounded and disabled. The big battles on the Western Front - the Marne, Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele - saw unprecedented butchery, and the horrors of attritional trench warfare. On the faster-moving and longer Eastern Front, an estimated two million Russian soldiers were lost; some of the bloodiest fighting of the war was on the Italian Front, fought in the Dolomite mountains and the Julian alps. A million Italian and Austrian soldiers died, leading Ernest Hemingway, who was an ambulanceman in Italy, to call it 'the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery' of the entire conflict.

Two million men fought at Verdun between February and December 1916, the war's longest battle. By the end, half of them had been slaughtered and the battle lines were about where they had been at the start. On the Somme, in the four months from 1 July 1916 over a million men died. When the battle ended in November, the British line had advanced six miles.

The trigger for war was the shooting of

Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, but the motivating force behind the eventual clash was the increasing need of sections of capital to expand production beyond domestic borders and acquire new markets.

The enormous industrial growth of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had led to the increasing internationalisation of capitalism. New powerful economies, especially Germany and the US, were jostling for room to expand. Economic competition became inextricably woven into the political, even the military, actions of states, as Eric Hobsbawm argued, and - as the recent book by Christopher Clark on the July crisis in 1914, *Sleepwalkers*, describes in great detail, the actions of the key actors involved.

This specific stage of capitalism, which in changed and developed form we still live with today, was described by Lenin and Bukharin in their theory of imperialism, written as part of resistance to the war in 1916, which analysed war as an inescapable feature of capitalism that could not be reformed away. Capitalism as a system cannot create peace, despite the hopes of some reformists and liberals then and now. Running through the system like the message in a stick of rock is a twofold conflict between classes and between national capitalisms (a 'band of warring brothers') - rival imperialisms pushed against each other's influence, making war inevitable.

Resistance to war

The years before the war had seen a rise in nationalist feeling in many areas of the globe but also a wave of revolutionary upheaval and strikes. There had been revolutions in 1905 in Russia, in Turkey in 1907 and in Mexico in 1912. In Britain, the Great Unrest of 1910-1914 was the biggest workers' movement since the Chartists. In Germany there was a wave of strikes be-

tween 1910 and 1912, and there were big strikes in Italy right up to its entry into the war in 1915.

The war broke the back of these struggles - although as support for the war ebbed, they re-emerged at a higher temperature. Initially war was seen among ruling classes as suiting domestic political ends as well as wider economic ones - war would sanction the repression of struggle at home, and hopefully pull people behind the flag.

There was some initial enthusiasm for the war, a fact that revisionists make much of, though it was by no means uncomplicated. The picture varied - in Italy there was little enthusiasm for the war among the general population and in every country there was significant opposition to the war, ranging from anti-war movements to conscientious objection.

The question remains, though, why did many enthusiastically volunteer? Trotsky, living in Vienna when war broke out, pointed to the fact that, for millions, the war represented a moment of profound change:

The people whose lives, day in and day out, pass in a monotony of hopelessness are many; they are the mainstay of modern society. The alarm of mobilisation breaks into their lives like a promise; the familiar and long-hated is overthrown, and the new and unusual reigns in its place. Changes still more incredible are in store for them in the future. For better or worse? For the better, of course - what can seem worse than 'normal' conditions?

To make sense of this, it is also worth bearing in mind that the general feeling

was that the war would be a short one, and - crucially - that those who had continued to oppose to the war were disoriented by the capitulation of the socialist parties of the Second International, who almost unanimously bowed before their governments and the 'national interest'. The Bolsheviks in Russia and the Italian PSI (Socialist Party) were alone in continuing to oppose the war once it started.

The initial enthusiasm was short-lived everywhere. Every state involved had to introduce conscription by 1916, and to keep men fighting required harsher and harsher methods. At the most extreme, the Italian army introduced 'decimation' for desertion, a policy by which one in ten men were shot if there was desertion in their company, and the entire north and centre of the country were designated a war zone, in order to contain internal protest.

The revolutionary moment

Class struggle began to rise again after the first year of the war, as the horror of the trenches combined with dramatic changes in European society

The fact that the war was fought between nations that were growing in economic strength and industrial capabilities meant that it was mechanized killing on a scale previously unknown. Arms production accelerated economic growth, and the working classes everywhere expanded rapidly as men were pulled from land into factories, along with women and boys. The pattern varied from country to country, depending on the previous levels of development: in industrialised nations like Britain, the nature of work changed with the accelerated production of war industries - women entered the workforce in significant numbers for the first time, for example. In countries like Italy with a significant peasant population the war trans-

formed the economic structure and class structure along with it as urban centres expanded rapidly with internal emigration from the countryside.

That dramatic social change accelerated and deepened existing antagonisms: workers were subject to military discipline, sacrifice, and all public and private life was subordinated to war production. The transformation of society had a massive impact on people's ideas. For millions of workers and peasants their sacrifices on the battlefields and in the factories demanded reward after the war - and many became increasingly aware that the sacrifice was not shared equally. In all countries, the contrast between those who fought and suffered and those who profited by the war was a key element in a rising class consciousness.

As the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci wrote just after the war:

Four years of war have rapidly changed the economic and intellectual climate. Vast workforces have come into being, and a deeply rooted violence in the relations between wage-earners and entrepreneurs has now appeared in such an overt form that it is obvious to even the dullest onlooker. No less spectacular is the open manner in which the bourgeois state...shows itself to be the instrument of this violence.

As a result:

A new class consciousness has emerged; and not only in the factories, but in the trenches as well...This consciousness is at an elementary level. It

is raw material waiting to be moulded. And it must be our doctrines that do the moulding.

People were driven to struggle and to revolution. For revisionist historians writing today, the struggle for more wages or better rations doesn't qualify as opposition to the war. But, increasingly, a collective refusal by workers, and soldiers, to passively accept the burdens of war was *in practice* an anti-war position, since it meant challenging the priorities of governments and employers - who were often making vast profits from the carnage. The duration and horror of the war, the ineptitude of the generals, the plummeting living standards, all fed into a dissolving of the patriotic glue holding nations together. The conditions of war shaped the politics and ideas of millions of working class people and peasants from Paris to the South Wales coalfields. Their struggles were forced forward by those conditions, but also by the understanding that the world would never be the same. But it was the example of the Russian Revolution that opened up real possibilities for change. The revolutionary transformation of society now became a viable option in the minds of millions - both at the front and in the factories.

The overthrow of the tsar and the establishment of workers' councils transformed resistance to the war beyond Russia, widening and uniting it. Strike figures in Britain, France and Italy jumped significantly in 1917. Links were forged between workers' struggles and those of soldiers. Mutinies escalated as war weariness increased, especially in the French Army where between April and September 1917 an estimated 500,000 soldiers mutinied in over half the army's divisions, generating

³M Ferro, *The Great War 1914-1918* (London, 1973), p181.

the 'greatest of all crises that Europe saw in the war before the October Revolution'.³

Unsurprisingly, given the level of slaughter at Verdun, the area between Paris and Verdun was the most affected by mutiny. In the two weeks immediately preceding the mutiny, more than 250,000 French soldiers had died to gain 500 yards of ground in the Chemin de Dames. In April 1917, entire units refused to go back up the line, protesting against bad conditions and against the offensive. Desertions almost doubled during 1917.

In May, mutineers from the 36th and 129th regiments met and composed a resolution: 'We want peace...we've had enough of the war and we want the deputies to know it... When we go into the trenches, we will plant a white flag on the parapet. The Germans will do the same, and we will not fight until the peace is signed'.⁴

Mutinous soldiers made connections with civilian workers: 'I am ready to go into the trenches, but we are doing like the clothing workers. We are going out on strike,' wrote one soldier. In June, two Russian brigades were moved to a camp at La Courtine, 200 miles south of Paris. They quickly established a soviet, and a proclamation from Russia passed around the units which advocated freedom of speech and revolution.

After the revolts were put down, military tribunals found 3,427 soldiers guilty of mutiny - 554 were sentenced to death, and 49 actually killed. For such an immense movement, the punishment was limited. The mutinies terrified the French generals and the ruling class. One writer, not espe-

cially sympathetic to mutiny or revolution, argues that 'France had narrowly avoided a revolution'.⁵

Mutinies were not confined to the French army. In September 1917 there were five days of disorder among British troops at Etaples base camp. Etaples was notorious for its brutal regime and bullying officers. An article in the *Workers Dreadnought* of 30 September carried a report from a participant in the mutiny: 'About four weeks ago about 10,000 men had a big racket at Etaples and cleared the place from one end to the other, and when the General asked what was wrong, they said they wanted the war stopped'.⁶

During 1917 mutiny and desertion rose also in the Italian army, despite harsh repressive measures intended to deter rebellion. Soldiers' and workers' resistance dovetailed: there were frequent demonstrations in the Italian countryside against the lack of food, conscription, the requisitioning of food and a myriad other injustices. Protests often led to violence against the police and wealthy citizens. Many of the protests joined forces with strikes in the towns, which were often led by women workers who could not be punished by being sent to the front.⁷ In June 35,000 workers went on strike in Liguria; a month later troops were sent into Naples to crush a strike in the key engineering and shipbuilding firms.⁸

Historian Giovanna Procacci says of the protests that they were 'economic, social and political, all at the same time.' Whatever the immediate cause: food shortages, harsh factory discipline,

⁴ J Winter and B Blaggett, op cit, p241.

⁵ L James, *Mutiny* (Buchan and Enright, 1987), p78

⁶ L James, p93

⁷G.Procacci, 'Popular Protest and Labour Conflict 1915-1918' (*Social History* 14: 1) pp.42-43. Women were 21.9 percent of the workforce by 1918, 64.2 percent of strikers in 1917 and 45.6 percent in 1918 (Procacci, p.46).

⁸Procacci, p.48

⁹Procacci, p.43

new waves of conscription, 'it was always against the war and for peace.'⁹ Strikes were often encouraged or even provoked by soldiers, who wrote letters urging their families to protest at the low wages and inadequate food supplies and to demonstrate against the war.¹⁰

The high point of Italian resistance during the war took place in Turin in August 1917. Delegates from the Petrograd Soviet visited the city, and the 40,000 strong public meeting turned into an anti-war demonstration, 'with cheers for Lenin and revolution'.¹¹ After two people were killed by police during a protest over bread shortages a general strike was called in the city. The protests quickly became insurrectionary, seen both by those involved and by the government and interventionists as the most powerful expression so far of a potentially revolutionary anti-war movement.

According to Marc Ferro, 'the strikes...were reminiscent in many ways of those in Petrograd in February. Women and youth had a vital part in them, trying to fraternise with the carabinieri [armed police] and shouting, 'Don't fire at your brothers'.¹²

In the first of six reports to his government over the following two days, a number which indicates how seriously he regarded the events, the British ambassador in Rome described the revolt as 'a spontaneous movement of popular discontent'.¹³ He subsequently blamed the strikes on socialist propaganda put about 'mainly by women'¹⁴ and inspired by the events in Russia. His description of events make clear their insurrectionary potential:

The barricades were constructed with skill and knowledge, largely of trees felled in the roadways, so as to fall and block the passage. Parts of machine guns were... surreptitiously withdrawn from the F.I.A.T. Works [sic] to be put together outside.¹⁵

In October 1917 the Italian army were humiliated at Caporetto: although the Central Powers did not significantly outnumber the Italian troops, it turned into a rout. The Central Powers took 293,000 prisoners and occupied the area around Venice losing no more than a handful of men. However, Caporetto was not simply a military disaster. There was an element of anti-war consciousness involved: 200,000 men surrendered, refusing to fight.

In Germany, the collapse of Russian tsarism made it increasingly obvious that the aims of industrialists were expansionist rather than defensive. In April 1917 a strike of 200,000 metal workers was led by militants opposed to the war. As in Italy, spontaneous unrest over food shortages began to merge with political opposition to the war. Between June 1917 and January 1918 there was a series of mutinies at Kiel among the fleet.

The October Revolution in Russia signalled the beginning of the end of the war. The Bolsheviks, calling for bread, peace and land, won a majority in the Petrograd soviet in September, and in October the provisional government that had been established in February was overthrown and the workers' councils formed the demo-

¹⁰ Both quotations from Procacci, p.46.

¹¹ C. Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism* (London 1967), p.471.

¹² M. Ferro, *The Great War*, (London 2002) p.201.

¹³ Ambassador Rodd to Balfour, 25 August 1917 (Public Records PRO. FO 371/2947/166679)

¹⁴ See Rodd, op cit. FO 371/2945/182469.

¹⁵ Both quotations from Ambassador Rodd to Balfour, 19 September 1917 (dated 15 September 1917), PRO. FO 371/2945/182469.

cratic basis of the new state.

The response to the revolution shaped the end of the war - on the one hand the revolution lit a torch of revolt across Europe: in Austria, in Hungary, in Italy, even in Britain, and most significantly in Germany in November 1918, The revolution was celebrated around the world by workers and oppressed groups as creating a new world.

The crisis of war opened up a huge space for revolutionary possibility, but its also important to remember that the transformation of Europe's societies - industrialisation, growing urbanisation, the changes and pressures on every class in society - also made many sections of society feel increasingly insecure. The war, and the massive changes it had brought about, resulted in deep polarisation to both left and right.

Changes in society did not just affect the working class. For many in middle class - students, young officers - the war was welcomed with the belief that it would sweep away the old order of things and forge a modern society. For many who owned small businesses or who were civil servants and such like, economic hardship combined with bitterness at big business and the fear of an increasingly militant and large working class. Revolution attracted many, but for very real fear of revolution drove others into the arms of reaction and fascism at the end of the war.

The war also brought other forces into play that destabilised capitalism. Following the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, Lenin wrote that national revolts were part of the social revolt against capitalism. Most were led by sections of the middle classes - the 1916 Arab revolt, the national movements in the Habsburg Empire - and Lenin argued for socialists to support such movements. He stressed that if they were not understood by revolution-

aries to be part of a generalised reaction to the system's crisis that could be united with other struggles as part of the challenge to capitalism and imperialism, those movements could become used against revolution. This remains a centrally important point for revolutionaries - that often the expressions of resistance and revolt are shaped by other ideas than those of socialism, but that does not mean they should be discounted.

The difference between Russia and Italy during the war makes this point clear: in Italy the socialist party was dominated by reformism, sectarianism and ultra-leftism - so the party made little attempt to win over peasants seizing land, or soldiers who formed their own organisation in opposition to fascism during 1919. The PSI denounced those who had fought, insulting soldiers as imperialist lackeys and so forth, and rejected alliances with the veterans' anti-government protests. This wartime sectarianism had catastrophic effects after the war when the PSI stood aside from the factory council movement in Turin and allowed it to be isolated and beaten. In Russia, the Bolshevik party was able to tie together grievances expressed by workers, soldiers and peasants - expressed in the slogan 'bread, peace and land' - and created a single wedge that could carry revolution through and begin to create a democratic state governed by those same workers, soldiers and peasants.

Revolution and revolt in the old empires terrified the world's ruling classes - despite being at war with each other, they united against the challenge of revolution. The Paris Peace Conference at Versailles was obsessed with the Russian Revolution: it established a 'sanitary cordon' of states as a barrier to prevent the revolution spreading across Central Europe. The world's ruling classes provided aid to the white armies in Russia fighting the civil

war and enforced a brutal blockade against Russia. In Germany, it was right-wing reformists who eventually derailed the workers' councils and beheaded the revolution.

The genuine 'democratic moment' represented by 1917 was rolled back across Europe, by rulers who claimed to be speaking in the interests of democracy. In 1919, while civil war devastated Russia - the counter revolutionary white armies aided and encouraged by all the Great Powers - Admiral Horthy suppressed the short lived Hungarian revolution, Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, Primo de Rivera in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, and one by one governments across Europe moved to the right, encouraged by the world's ruling classes who were more frightened of revolution than of each other.

Nevertheless, part of the history of the war - the part that the Tories and many historians would rather downplay or erase altogether - is that of the greatest revolutionary moments and possibilities of the twentieth century. The depth of crisis in the system was exacerbated by processes that were already in motion but were greatly accelerated by the war. Out of the most desperate of defeats for revolutionary hopes - the capitulation of the Second International parties and the butchery of millions of workers at each other's hands - the very forces dividing the world into antagonistic nation states were also internationalising the experience of its workers and soldiers.

Rosa Luxemburg's *Junius pamphlet*, written when she was imprisoned for anti-

war activity, is at once a howl of rage and sadness at the destruction of so many lives and a call to arms. At the time of writing it must have felt like an article of faith that revolution could come forth from carnage, but, as we have seen, instinctive collective resistance to war never disappeared and only three years later the flare of the Russian revolution demonstrated the capacity for such resistance to pose an alternative to the murderousness of capitalism:

It is the finest, the most intelligent, the best trained forces of international socialism, the vanguard of the whole world working class who are now being gagged and butchered in heaps....Here capitalism reveals its death's head; here it betrays to the world that it has forfeited its historic right to exist, that its continued rule is no longer compatible with the progress of mankind.

The madness will cease and the bloody spectre of hell will disappear only when the workers of Germany and France, of England and Russia finally awaken from their frenzy, extend to one another the hand of brotherhood and drown the bestial chorus of the imperialist hyenas with the old, mighty and thunderous battlecry of labour: workers of the world, unite!