

Imperialism and the road to socialist revolution

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In 1970, Vietnam veterans protesting the Vietnam war, 'We won't fight another rich man's war.'

Introduction to the second edition of “[War and Lenin in the 21st Century](#)” by Gary Wilson.

Over a century has passed since Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, wrote “Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism.” This work defined the politics of the last century. That’s in part because Lenin was the leader of the first socialist revolution as well as the de facto leader of the Third (Communist) International. Even if Lenin had not led a socialist revolution, his pamphlet likely would have been influential, though maybe not as much as it has been.

To fully understand the importance of Lenin’s pamphlet, you need to know the circumstances in which it was written and why Lenin wrote it. Lenin always had a specific political purpose for his major writings.

Lenin wrote “Imperialism” while European capitalism was tearing itself apart in the upheaval of the First World War.

Leaders of the Second International — an international organization that was established in 1889 to unite socialists worldwide — had recognized the growing likelihood of a major conflict among the European powers. While Lenin expected the war, the disintegration of the Second International caught him off guard. As the war unfolded in Europe in the summer of 1914, most of the Second International’s branches caved in. They sided with their own countries against the other countries, effectively ending the Second International.

Before the war, the socialist parties of Germany, France, and other European countries had been agitating widely against war. Workers staged mass anti-war rallies in most capital cities, pledging solidarity with workers of all countries against the bosses. At that time, the anti-war struggle was considered an inseparable part of the working-class struggle against capitalism.

Based on the sizable anti-war movement before the war and the anti-war conferences held by the parties of the Second International from all countries, the outbreak of the war was expected to put the overthrow of capitalism at the top of the Second International's agenda. The workers of all these countries were united to defend their own interests against the capitalists and their war.

Workers were expected to unite to overthrow their rulers, who were forcing them to take arms against fellow workers in other countries.

Competitive capitalism had transformed into monopoly capitalism. Monopoly capitalism meant imperialism and the competition for colonial domination and for world markets.

As Lenin points out in "Imperialism," it wasn't just about colonizing other countries. In the drive for capitalist profits through the exploitation of labor, a small group of powerful capitalist countries maintain dominance through monopoly control of finance and industry. This exploitation took many forms, such as extracting resources, controlling markets, or dominating trade.

Imperialism (monopoly capitalism) was the root cause of the war; therefore, overturning capitalism would end it. That's what the Second International had vowed before the war. However, too many of the Second International parties in the imperialist countries ended up supporting their own imperialists in the war.

Lenin's writings in those years were linked to the Second International's collapse and the efforts to establish a new Third International. From Lenin's perspective, the new International would be based on the lessons learned from the Second International's failure.

The meaning of imperialism

Today's socialists face the questions that confronted earlier generations of socialists,

both in the U.S. and worldwide, especially the question of imperialism and imperialist war. What is the meaning of the word imperialism?

What position should you take on the wars now raging in Palestine, Yemen, and Syria and the threatening spread of a U.S. war on Iran? What about the U.S./NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine? Or U.S. AFRICOM's operations in Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Niger? Or Washington's threats targeting Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea? Or the war buildup against China?

The struggle for socialism in 1914 and now

Struggles against imperialism are often fought with socialist goals, such as the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Socialists today support and defend Cuba and the Cuban Communist Party.

However, anti-imperialist struggles are not always led by and for the workers. Sometimes, as we have seen, resistance to imperialism is led by reformist political forces that are pro-capitalist, even reactionary (racist and xenophobic), the opposite of all that socialists believe in. What stand should we take when Biden mobilizes the U.S. Army and Navy, the Air Force and Marines, and NATO, then sends billions in weapons and ammunition to Ukraine for war on Russia to enforce, in his words, a civilizing “rules-based [Western] international order” against the “evil” Putin?

Before World War One, socialists in the Second International opposed the imperialist war against the reactionary monarchy of China as a colonialist war of aggression. But the right wing of the Second International began to argue that imperialism had a civilizing mission. They claimed that Western capitalism was bringing “Western civilization” to the “uncivilized nations” (forgetting that the brutality of Western capitalism, colonization, enslavement, and exploitation is the most uncivilized force ever seen in history). They said those countries must go through a stage of capitalism and become “Western civilized.”

A majority of the leaders of the Second International rejected this. However, the openly pro-imperialist, pro-colonial, racist right-wing Social Democrats who supported the “civilizing mission” of imperialism were tolerated as a legitimate current within the Second International.

Later, the whole Second International was ripped apart as various sections of the International supported their own imperialist governments against other imperialist governments. After this occurred, Lenin and his supporters concluded that the Third International they were trying to build would have to exclude such racist, pro-imperialist, pro-colonial forces.

Uniting two revolutionary currents

Lenin's pamphlet on imperialism connects two revolutionary currents: the proletarian revolution in imperialist countries and the anti-imperialist liberation struggles in colonized nations.

Rather than being separate, unequal events, Lenin shows they are interdependent; they are linked.

Imperialism is global, making the world revolutionary process also global. Lenin's analysis extended Marxism from being a theory of the proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries to a theory of world revolution.

Lenin wrote in another document that the Communist International's entire policy should rest primarily on a closer union of the proletarians in the imperialist countries and the oppressed masses of all countries for a joint revolutionary struggle to overthrow the landowners and the ruling class. (Thus, the slogan “Workers and oppressed peoples of the world unite!”) That unity alone can guarantee victory over capitalism.

Socialism is now the goal of all revolutions, no matter where they occur. As for why

the Second International collapsed, Lenin answered based on an earlier suggestion by Frederick Engels that a “labor aristocracy” had risen in the imperialist countries that were “bribed” from imperialist super-profits.

At that time, the U.S. was an emerging imperialist power. As a settler state, its colonies were internal, starting with the brutal subjugation and genocide of the Indigenous population and the enslaved African American colony.

Following enslavement, African Americans were forced to sell their labor power at a considerably cheaper price than the white workers and, therefore, perform extra unpaid labor compared to white workers. This extra unpaid labor created a profit above and beyond the average rate of profit, the super-profit that was partially shared with a privileged, segregated labor aristocracy, particularly the labor leaders and politicians.

This is the material basis for the widespread racism among white workers that has so weakened the U.S. working class and the labor unions. The U.S. has also attracted many immigrants from countries around the world who are also super-exploited. Among the most super-exploited were the immigrants from China starting in the late 1800s. The various immigrant communities, in some cases, have served as what amounted to “internal colonies” that produced extra surplus value.

That’s why the fight against racism, against national oppression, for Black and Brown liberation, for gender liberation, and for international working-class solidarity is paramount in the struggle for socialism.

War and Lenin in the 21st century

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