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What will I Do When America Goes to War?

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Paul Mattick answers three questions put to him by the magazine Modern Monthly. The article also featured answers from other radicals. From https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1935/war-america.htm.

The Questions

1. What will you do when America goes to war?
2. Will your decision be altered if Soviet Russia is an ally of the United States in a war with Japan?
3. Would a prospective victory by Hitler over most of Europe move you to urge United States participation in opposition to Germany to prevent such a catastrophe?

1.

Personally, I take neither pleasure nor interest in going into any war whatever; still, to declare oneself against war seems to me silly and useless. One has to set material forces against it, not mere attitudes, and anyone who fails to take part in shaping those forces is also not against war, however much he may protest that he is. The question itself suggests the idea that one is supposed to come out for peace and against war, but I am opposed to capitalist peace just as much as to capitalist war. Nor do I have any choice between the two situations; I can only contribute to putting an end to a system which has to assure its existence on the tendency to alternate between war and peace. In order to be opposed to capitalist war, one must be opposed to capitalism, since the wars as well as the crisis belong among this system's conditions of existence. And so it goes without saying that I shall not in any case help to defend a system which I find thoroughly repulsive and by which my life is spoiled.

If America goes to war, that means under the present conditions that the chronic world crisis is to be further sharpened in a world war, in which the crisis seeks its solution. It is today senseless to look for the causes of war in the policy and the necessities of particular nations; the world war is the affair of world capitalism. In view of such a situation, the will and the design of the individual sink to ridiculous insignificance, and whether this person or that comes out for or against war becomes almost a matter of indifference. As things stand, today, – and this holds just for today, – there is little ground for assuming that the next war will be prevented through action of the working class. It is much more probable that we shall have to wait for the next world war to produce a new world-revolutionary situation, and so it is very difficult for a revolutionist not to hope for the war's acceleration. But he cannot come out in favor of war any more than in favor of peace; he has simply nothing to do with this world, but shapes for himself his *new* world.

The mass of workers is reactionary out of necessity, as it also grows revolutionary out of necessity. The individual, in his attitude toward war, has to consider not only himself but also the mass phenomena. What he *wants* to do does not exhaust the question; what he *can* do is of greater importance. The working class will probably today go to war for Capital just as it also works for Capital, and both for the same reasons. If this situation fails to change, then the revolutionary war-rejector will remain a voice in the wilderness and can only wait for the turn of events. His attitude toward the war situation is then practically only that of living through the non-revolutionary period. It is nonsense to hold as an axiom for all time that one must get into the war in order to be able some time to direct the weapons against his own bourgeoisie, just as it is also false to insist on refusal of military service under all conditions. The revolutionist cannot, in a time which presents no possibilities of action, have any interest in getting out of life. A dead man has ceased to be anything whatever, hence also to be a revolutionist. If staying away from the war involves greater danger to one's life than does taking part in the thing, the choice is not difficult, for it is just as stupid to die for an idea *and nothing else* as to die for capitalism. If refusal of military service is possible, only an idiot could, in my opinion, let himself be persuaded that one should take part in the war in order to convert it. It is not until the war machine ceases to function accurately and the masses rise up out of themselves that the revolutionizing possibility is present; but then it is certainly also a matter of indifference as to where the revolutionist happens to be. If by reason of the unfavorable situation, refusal to serve is of *no* real importance, then it is senseless to expose oneself. If it has a revolutionary significance, then one must exercise it, even though a war were favorable to the objective presuppositions for changing society, since one can never side in any capitalistic affray. There is *no* absolute and universally valid answer to the question here proposed. In the different concrete situations, the practical class struggle is likely to answer the question differently. And yet war sets no special task either for the individual or for the class: the historical task of the workers merely presses for its solution, which remains the same in war as in peace.

2.

From the standpoint of the proletariat, it is today no longer permissible to reject certain wars and accept others. The enemy is world capitalism, so that even a Russo-American alliance against Japan would present the workers with no new tasks. State-capitalist Russia is interested in and bound up with the maintenance of world capitalism. As a support of imperialist capitalism, Russia herself must be regarded as an imperialist power. The Russian workers have the same tasks as the German or the American: the overthrow of world capitalism, hence also the overthrow of Russian state capitalism. Support of the Russian alliance policy amounts to promoting the next world war.

3.

Anyone who were to answer the third question with Yes would be nothing more than an ordinary war monger. Germany cannot be differentiated from the other capitalist countries. Everywhere the same capitalism rules, differing only in degrees of development and unessential particulars. Anyone who chooses between Hitler, Stalin and Roosevelt has by that very circumstance declared that he takes up for a capitalism which he finds agreeable and thereby also announced his willingness to participate in the next war.