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The duties of revolutionaries and the 1914-1918 war - Christian Cornélissen

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I fully share the conceptions that our comrades Bertrand and Paul Reclus have developed in two articles in *Plus Loin*, on the attitude of interventionist anarchists during the World War. I could have simply referred readers to them or simply expressed my sympathy with the spirit of these articles. But I feel, with regard to the publication of the manifesto known as "of the Sixteen", a certain responsibility, and I also want to take advantage of this opportunity to clarify, in my opinion, the role and duties of revolutionary libertarians in international conflicts.

Throughout the war I occupied a position which enabled me, better than other comrades, to follow closely the attitude of the entire left and extreme left of the workers' movement: revolutionary syndicalists, libertarian communists and anarchists.

At the beginning of the war, I went - it was my holiday - to Holland to ask my compatriots if they would let Belgium be crushed without protest, without any act of common defence, and then - perhaps - Paris. I returned at the time when Antwerp was in flames, and I resumed my place as editor of the newspaper *La Bataille Syndicaliste*. I was particularly responsible for the foreign policy of this newspaper, as indeed later at the *Bataille tout court*, and I kept this position there throughout the war.

Now, in Holland, as in England and especially in Paris, I had observed that all revolutionary spirit had been blunted, if not completely disappeared, in the circles of the extreme left. Our comrades in the struggle seemed to have become Tolstoyans.

I expressed my astonishment at this to my friends back in Paris, and then for eight months I corresponded on the same subject with our friends in London, in particular with Pierre Kropotkin and Cherkosov, explaining that in my opinion we could not remain inactive, as we had no right to hover "above the fray".

"Send us a draft manifesto", replied Kropotkin. I did, but the Londoners felt that the text they sent was sufficiently in the form of an appeal, and it was they (Grave was also living in England during the war) who drafted the manifesto. The text was reworked following some comments from Grave and myself, and perhaps from other people too. And if, at the beginning, the document bore only fifteen signatures, a second edition already included about *one hundred and twenty*, comrades from all countries (French, Italian, Swiss, English, etc...) and some of whom had expressly written behind their names : "to the armies".

In short, the manifesto clearly expressed the opinion of the internationalist syndicalists and libertarians, who had remained *revolutionaries*.

And here I have come to expound what I said in Holland, as in England (in an interview with Malatesta) and in Paris : As revolutionaries and internationalists, we had no right to fold our arms and allow the French Republic and Western Democracy to be crushed by Prussian hobgoblins. We called ourselves revolutionaries, and as such we had a duty, *not only to defend the Future against the Present, but also to defend the acquisitions of the Present against the Past*.

There was no doubt in the minds of any of us internationalists that European and world civilisation would suffer a regression of more than a century and return to the Ancien Régime of pre-1789, if Germany were victorious. With France crushed, imperialist Germany would have competed in submarine warfare against England. Then it would have been the turn of the United States: the Americans understood this.

It wasn't even Kaiser Wilhelm II who was in charge of the war he started it was the caste of militaristic hobgoblins who dreamt of German hegemony in Europe and the whole world.

Of course, we are now also seeing a social reaction, particularly in the victorious countries. How could it have been otherwise after a world war that lasted four years?

However, twenty-six dynasties swept away in one fell swoop in Germany, Austria freed from its emperor, and Russia from its autocratic regime, all constitute undeniable progress for humanity. In addition to these political advances, there have been agrarian reforms and the break-up of large seigneurial estates in all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in Germany and Austria as well as in the Balkans and Russia. The world war even had repercussions on the Chinese revolution.

On the other hand, the political and social reaction in England, France and the United States, is certainly less strong than it would have been in the whole world after a victory of the Ancien Régime. This reaction is most effective in Italy, and it seems to me that it is this fact which has impressed our Italian comrade Fabbri too much in his judgment.

In my opinion, our comrade judges the international situation much more harshly than it deserves, and in particular the danger of a new international war seems much less threatening to me than to him. On the other hand, I consider a social revolution to be imminent in all the countries impoverished by the war.

In any case, even if a new war broke out, the extreme left of the workers' movement could not, in my opinion, act any differently than the internationalist revolutionaries acted in 1916. They will have to have before their eyes the great paths of human civilisation and they will not be able to remain inactive.

"But this war is not ours, it is a capitalist war", I was told in the heated meetings in Holland. And one of my opponents added: "If it were the social revolution, or if the outcome of the war could serve the social revolution, we would naturally take sides."

First of all, we cannot get rid of a global scourge like the 1914-1918 war with a few words about "capitalism". This war for the domination of peoples and races had even more roots than the rapacity of the great industrialists and financiers, of all those who made their fortune from the misfortune of others.

It is doubtful," I replied to my opponents, "that comrades who have not been able to defend the achievements of the great Revolution of 1789 and those of 1830 and 1848 will be able to defend the social revolution better in the future against the forces of present-day capitalism. In a period of world revolution, the weak will also be able to "put on their slippers" by declaring themselves "against all violence".

I would not reproach our non-interventionist comrades if we were partisans of non-resistance, Tolstoyans. But our anti-militarism is only one of the principles of the extreme left in Western countries. It is a secondary principle, and if tomorrow this principle clashes with another predominant one, if tomorrow the whole progress of civilisation is at stake - as it was in 1914-1918 - it is quite possible that the comrades of that time will have to forget their hatred of war in the face of the need to defend the new acquisitions of civilisation.

For, in short, peoples, like social classes, have the civilisation they deserve, and those who do not know how to defend themselves inevitably decline. This is a law of Nature, which man cannot afford to forget.