

Principles and tactics in war - Rudolf Klement

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We reprint here an article written by Rudolf Klement, one of Trotsky's secretaries, who was at the time a member of the International Secretariat (IS) of the Movement for the Fourth International. Klement, born in Germany in 1908.¹ He was a student of philosophy² and an accomplished linguist (he spoke six languages) and his devotion to the movement was without equal.

He joined Trotsky in exile in Prinkipo in May 1933, moved to France with him and parted company only when Trotsky was deported to Norway in 1935. Klement was entrusted with the post of Administrative Secretary of the IS. It undoubtedly shows the confidence placed in Klement by Trotsky and the rest of the Movement for the Fourth International.

The article, 'The tasks of the proletariat in war?', was written in December 1937 under the pseudonym of W(alter) St(een). It was first published in English in May 1938 under the title 'Principles and Tactics in War?' in the *New Internationalist*.³

Klement explains the revolutionary principles that guide the Marxist understanding of war. But he also does much more. As an active revolutionary he is concerned to lay down those measures the international working class needs to undertake faced with different kinds of wars. Today, with imperialism's forces massing in the Gulf, Klement's article has lost none of its strength as a guide to action.

Klement explains the importance of revolutionary defeatism in the imperialist countries, and goes on to show how this should express itself in the case of a war against a non-imperialist opponent which is carrying out a progressive struggle against the imperialist power. He makes clear that the article contains little that is new. He bases himself squarely on the 1934 document 'War and the Fourth International',⁴ written by Trotsky and adopted by the international Trotskyist movement. Klement's article was occasioned by the need to clear up an important confusion which was threatening to disrupt the Movement for a Fourth International.

Towards the end of 1937 Klement, IS member Walter Held and other exiled German Trotskyists, began the publication of *Der einzige Weg* (The Only Road). The first issue carried a short review of 'The Case of Leon Trotsky?', the transcripts of evidence given to the Dewey Commission

The review highlighted one particular exchange between Trotsky and Albert Goldman, his lawyer, in which Trotsky dealt with the question of how French workers should react if French imperialism were to make an alliance with the USSR.⁵ Klement says that this short quotation had given rise to 'false interpretations' and that it was necessary to put the matter straight.

In fact the article threatened to detonate a row which had been rumbling on for some time within the Belgian section of the MFI, the Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire. At the heart of this dispute was a fundamental political difference between Trotsky and the leader of the PSR, Georges Vereeken.

No sooner had Vereeken seen the review than he accused Trotsky of 'going back to Stalinist policies'. He continued:

'The extract which the IS finds so interesting, will ideologically disarm our comrades . . . I consider this opinion totally false, dangerous and certain to lead to our movement to end up in the holy alliance of the bourgeois democratic countries.'⁶

Without Trotsky's knowledge, Klement launched a political counter-offensive against Vereeken and the PSR leadership. On the 18 December he wrote a stinging letter to the PSR EC. In one particularly telling passage he wrote:

'Comrade Vereeken lacks the most elementary notion of what revolutionary defeatism is. This results both from the fact that he identifies revolutionary defeatism with the sabotage of the whole war machinery and from the fact that he sees political opposition to the government as nothing but integration into the holy alliance. This is most astonishing since up to now, in explaining revolutionary defeatism, we have always stressed that it doesn't consist of blowing up bridges or acts of individual terrorism against the military command, but rather of continuing the class struggle during the war and preparing the masses for the revolution, which means irreconcilable political opposition to the bourgeois regime.'⁷

His letter ends:

'To omit nothing which can favour the military actions of the states which the international proletariat has the duty to defend, here means using every means (revolutionary agitation and military sabotage) to weaken the activity of one's own imperialism. This in no way means that in such cases we should become partisans of individual terrorism, for in the first place we should have no intentions of substituting this for revolutionary action to bring down the regime, and because such sabotage and terror can and must take on a mass character, can and must do so—for here lies its chance of effectiveness—with the sympathy and support of the proletariat in the army and outside it.

'Obviously it will be difficult in the reality of war to practise both revolutionary defeatism in one's own country and defencism towards the USSR etc, and to combine the two. But the conclusion to be drawn is not that we should close our eyes to such necessities, and limit ourselves to repeating schematically: revolutionary defencism everywhere! That way we should find ourselves at the crucial moment without a real directive. Instead we should be thinking now about arming the members for every eventuality. This is also the only way to prevent the temptation to join the holy alliance taking hold of revolutionary militants in difficult situations.'⁸

Three days after this letter the initial draft of 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in War' was finished. Within a few short months the article had been published in English, French and German and was to form a new weapon in the arsenal of the revolutionary programme on war.

In July 1938 Klement was assassinated by the Stalinist secret police, the GPU. His headless corpse was found floating in the Seine at Meulan, outside Paris. The life of this 'unselfish and courageous' young man was over.

Klement's death was a loss for revolutionaries all over the world. Fifty years later his article is still important, and can serve to educate and guide the new ranks of revolutionaries who will complete Klement's work, stopped in its tracks by Stalin's executioners.

Notes

1. And not 1910 as often suggested. Writings: Supplement 1934-40, p950, n776
2. E.g. Oeuvres, Grenoble 1984, p30, n5
3. To our knowledge, the article has only been reprinted twice before. Firstly by Workers Power (Dec 1980) and more recently by Revolutionary History (Vol1, No1, Spring 1988)
4. Writings 1933-34, New York 1975, pp299-329
5. The Case of Leon Trotsky, New York 1969, pp289-290
6. From PSR EC minutes, 15.12.37. Cited in Vereeken, op cit, pp265-267
7. Ibid, pp265-267

The review of the book The case of Leon Trotsky in the first number of the periodical Der Einzige Weg quotes the following interesting statement of comrade Trotsky on the difference in the tasks of the proletariat during a war between France-Soviet Union and Germany-Japan (reproduced here somewhat more completely):

?Stolberg: Russia and France already have a military alliance. Suppose an international war breaks out. I am not interested in what you say about the Russian working class at this time. I know that. What would you say to the French working class in reference to the defense of the Soviet Union? ?Change the French bourgeois government?, would you say?

?Trotsky: This question is more or less answered in our document, The War and the Fourth International, in this sense: In France I would remain in opposition to the government and would develop systematically this opposition. In Germany I would do anything I could to sabotage the war machinery. They are two different things. In Germany and in Japan I would apply military methods as far as I am able to fight, oppose, and injure the machinery, the military machinery of Japan, to disorganise it, both in Germany and in Japan. In France it is political opposition against the bourgeoisie, and the preparation of the proletarian revolution. Both are revolutionary methods. But in Germany and Japan I have as my immediate aim the disorganisation of the whole machinery. In France I have the aim of the proletarian revolution . . .

?Goldman: Suppose you have the chance to take power during a war, in France, would you advocate it if you had the majority of the proletariat?

?Trotsky: Naturally.? (P 289)

Within the limits of a book review it was naturally impossible, with this isolated, half-improvised, necessarily incomplete and special colloquial statement, to develop the general problems of the revolutionary struggle in wartime or even to throw a sufficient theoretical light on that special question. Since the above quotation thereupon unfortunately led to misunderstandings, and worse yet, to malicious distortions (?preparing for the civil peace in France?, renunciation of revolutionary defeatism, etc!), it is well to make up here for the previous neglect.

As to the basic principles of the revolutionary struggle against war and during it, considerations of space compel us to confine ourselves here to our theses on war,* which were adopted in May 1934 by the International Secretariat of our movement, have since formed one of the most important programmatic documents of Bolshevism, and acquire more topical importance with the passing of every day.

With regard to the specific question that interests us, comrade Trotsky, in the statement above, makes

reference to the following points in the theses on war:

?44. Remaining the determined and devoted defender of the workers? state in the struggle with imperialism, the international proletariat will not, however, become an ally of the imperialist allies of the USSR. The proletariat of a capitalist country which finds itself in alliance with the USSR must retain fully and completely its irreconcilable hostility to the imperialist government of its own country. In this sense, its policy will not differ from that of the proletariat in a country fighting against the USSR. But in the nature of practical action considerable differences may arise, depending on the concrete war situation. For instance, it would be absurd and criminal in case of war between the USSR and Japan for the American proletariat to sabotage the sending of American munitions to the USSR. But the proletariat of a country fighting against the USSR would be absolutely obliged to resort to actions of this sort?strikes, sabotage, etc.

?45. Intransigent proletarian opposition to the imperialist aims of the given government, the treacherous character of this ?alliance?, its speculation on capitalist overturn in the USSR, etc. The policy of a proletarian party in an ?allied? as well as in an enemy imperialist country should therefore be directed towards the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the seizure of power. Only in this way can a real alliance with the USSR be created and the first workers? state be saved from disaster.? (p 21)

The wars of recent years did not represent a direct struggle between imperialist powers, but colonial expeditions (Italy-Abyssinia, Japan-China) and conflicts over spheres of influence (China, Chaco, and in a certain sense, also Spain), and therefore did not for the time being, degenerate into a world conflict. Hitler hopes to attack the USSR tomorrow just as Japan attacks China, i.e. to alter the imperialist relationship of forces without directly violating the essential interests of the other imperialisms and thereby temporarily to localise the conflict. These events, occurring since 1934, have clearly shown that the above-quoted theses on the attitude of the proletariat of imperialist countries are valid not only in an anti-Soviet war but in all wars in which it must take sides?and those are precisely the ones involved in recent years.

War is only the continuation of politics by other means. Hence the proletariat must continue its class struggle in wartime, among other things with the new means which the bourgeoisie hands him. It can and must utilise the weakening of its ?own? bourgeoisie in the imperialist countries in order relentlessly to prepare and to carry out its social revolution in connection with the military defeat engendered by the war, and to seize the power. This tactic, known as revolutionary defeatism, is one of the strongest levers of the proletarian world revolution in our epoch, and therewith of historical progress.

Only, where the struggle is imperialistic only on one side, and a war of liberation of non-imperialist nations or of a socialist country against existing or threatening imperialist oppression on the other, as well as in civil wars between the classes or between democracy and fascism?the international proletariat cannot and should not apply the same tactic to both sides. Recognising the progressive character of this war of liberation it must fight decisively against the main enemy, reactionary imperialism (or else against the reactionary camp, in the case of a civil war), that is, fight for the victory of the socially (or politically) oppressed or about-to-be oppressed: USSR, colonial and semi-colonial countries like Abyssinia or China, or Republican Spain, etc.

Here too, however, it remains mindful of its irreconcilable class opposition to its ?own? bourgeoisie?or its political opposition to the Soviet bureaucracy?and does not surrender without resistance any of its independent positions. As in the imperialist countries it strives with all its strength for the social revolution and the seizure of power, the establishment of its dictatorship, which, moreover, alone makes possible a sure and lasting victory over the imperialists. But in such cases, it cannot and does not, as in the imperialist camp, seek revolutionary victory at the cost of a military defeat but rather along the road of a military victory of his country.¹

Class struggle and war are international phenomena, which are decided internationally. But since every struggle permits of but two camps (bloc against bloc) and since imperialistic fights intertwine with the class war (world imperialism?world proletariat), there arise manifold and complex cases. The bourgeoisie of the semi-colonial countries or the liberal bourgeoisie menaced by its ?own? fascism, appeal for aid to the ?friendly? imperialisms; the Soviet Union attempts, for example, to utilise the antagonisms between the imperialisms by concluding alliances with one group against another, etc. The proletariat of all countries, the only internationally solidary?and not least of all because of that, the only progressive?class, thereby finds itself in the complicated situation in wartime, especially in the new world war, of combining revolutionary defeatism towards his own bourgeoisie with support of progressive wars.

This situation is utilised with a vengeance right now and certainly will be tomorrow, by the social patriots of the social democratic, Stalinist or anarchist stripe, in order to have the proletarians permit themselves to be slaughtered for the profits of capital under the illusion of helping their brothers of the USSR, China and elsewhere. It serves the social traitors, furthermore, to depict the revolutionists not only as ?betrayers of the fatherland? (just as they are now shouted down as agents of Franco). All the more reason why the proletariat, especially in the imperialist countries, requires, in this seemingly contradictory situation, a particularly clear understanding of these combined tasks and of the methods for fulfilling them.

In the application of revolutionary defeatism against the imperialist bourgeoisie and its state there can be no fundamental difference, regardless of whether the latter is ?friendly? or hostile to the cause supported by the proletariat, whether it is in ?treacherous? alliance with the allies of the proletariat (Stalin, the bourgeoisie of the semi-colonial countries, the colonial peoples, anti-fascist liberalism), or is conducting a war against them. The methods of revolutionary defeatism remain unaltered: revolutionary propaganda, irreconcilable opposition to the regime, the class struggle from its purely economic up to its highest political form (the armed uprising), fraternisation of the troops, transformation of the war into the civil war.

The international defense of the proletarian states, of the oppressed peoples fighting for their freedom, and the international support of the armed anti-fascist civil war must, however, naturally take on various forms in accordance with whether one?s ?own? bourgeoisie stands on their side or combats them. Apart from the political preparation of the social revolution, whose rhythm and methods are in no way identical with those of war, this defense must naturally assume military forms. In addition to revolutionary support it consists, consequently, in military support of the progressive cause, as well as in the military damaging of its imperialist opponent.

The military support can naturally take on a decisive scope only where the proletariat itself has the levers of power and of economy in its hands (USSR, and to a certain extent, Spain in the summer of 1936). In the imperialist countries which are allied with the countries conducting progressive and revolutionary wars, it boils down to this: that the proletariat fights with revolutionary means for an effective, direct military support, controlled by it, of the progressive cause (?Airplanes for Spain!? cried the French workers). In any case, it must promote and control a really guaranteed direct military support (sending of arms, ammunition, food, specialists, etc), even at the cost of an ?exception? from the direct class struggle.² It will have to be left to the instinct and revolutionary perspicacity of the proletariat, which is well aware of its tasks, to make the right distinction in every concrete situation, to avoid injuring the military interests of the far-off ally of the proletariat out of narrow national class struggle considerations, no matter how revolutionary they seem, as well to avoid doing the dirty work for its ?own? imperialism on the pretext of giving indirect aid to its allies. The only real and decisive aid that the workers can bring the latter is by seizing and holding the power.

It is otherwise?so far as the outward form of its struggle goes?with the proletariat of the imperialisms engaged in a direct struggle against the progressive cause. In addition to its struggle for the revolution, it is

its duty to engage in military sabotage for the benefit of the 'enemy'—the enemy of its bourgeoisie but its own ally. As a means of revolutionary defeatism in the struggle between imperialist countries, military sabotage, like individual terror, is completely worthless. Without replacing the social revolution, or even advancing it by a hair's breadth, it would only help one imperialism against another, mislead the vanguard, sow illusions among the masses and thus facilitate the game of the imperialists.³ On the other hand, military sabotage is imperiously imposed as an immediate measure in defense of the camp that is fighting imperialism and is consequently progressive. As such, it is understood by the masses, welcomed and furthered. The defeat of one's 'own' country here becomes not a lesser evil that is taken into the bargain (a lesser evil than the 'victory' bought by civil peace and the abandonment of the revolution), but the direct and immediate goal, the task of the proletarian struggle. The defeat of one's 'own' country would, in this case, be no evil at all, or an evil much more easily taken into the bargain for it would signify the common victory of the people liberated from the existing or threatening imperialist yoke and of the proletariat of its enemy, over the common overlord—imperialist capital. Such a victory would be a powerful point of departure for the international proletarian revolution, not least of all in the 'friendly' imperialist countries.⁴

Thus we see how different war situations require from the revolutionary proletariat of the various imperialist countries, if it wishes to remain true to itself and to its goal, different fighting forms, which may appear to schematic spirits to be 'deviations' from the basic principle of revolutionary defeatism, but which result in reality only from the combination of revolutionary defeatism with the defense of certain progressive camps.

Moreover, from a higher historical standpoint these two tasks coincide: in our imperialist epoch, the national bourgeoisie of the non-imperialist countries—like the Soviet bureaucracy—because of its fear of the working class which is internationally matured for the socialist revolution and dictatorship, is not in a position to conduct an energetic struggle against imperialism. They do not dare to appeal to the forces of the proletariat and at a definite stage of the struggle they inevitably call upon imperialism for aid against their 'own' proletariat. The complete national liberation of the colonial and semi-colonial countries from imperialist enslavement, and of the Soviet Union from the internal and external capitalist destruction and anarchy, the bourgeois democratic revolution, the defense from fascism—all these tasks can be solved, nationally and internationally, only by the proletariat. Their fulfilment grows naturally into the proletarian revolution. The coming world war will be the most titanic and murderous explosion in history, but because of that it will also burst all the traditional fetters and in its flames the revolutionary and liberation movements of the entire world will be fused into one glowing stream.

To present clearly, even now, to the proletariat the problems of the coming war and its combined tasks—this serious and difficult task is one of the most urgent of our day. The Bolshevik-Leninists alone have taken it upon themselves to arm the proletariat for its struggle and to create the instrument with which it will gain its future victories: the programme, the methods, the organisation of the Fourth International.

Brussels, December 1937

Notes

1. We leave aside the case where wars between two non-imperialist countries are only or predominantly the masked combat between two foreign imperialisms—England and America in the Chaco war—or the case where the war of liberation of an oppressed nation is only a pawn in the hand of an imperialistic group and a mere part of a general imperialistic conflict—Serbia from 1914 to 1918.

2. It may confidently be assumed that for the French bourgeoisie in wartime a strike of the Marseilles harbour workers, which makes an exception of war shipments to Russia in which it is least of all interested,

would be particularly vexatious! No less nonsensical would it be, for example, in the course of a printers' strike, not to allow the appearance of the labour papers which are needed for the strike struggle itself.

3. Lenin wrote on 26 July 1915 (see *Gegen den Strom*) against Trotsky's false slogan of 'Neither victory nor defeat' and said polemically:

'And revolutionary actions during the war surely and undoubtedly signify not only the wish for its defeat but also an actual furtherance of such a defeat (for the 'discerning' reader: this by no means signifies that 'bridges be blown up', that abortive military strikes should be staged, and in general that the revolutionists should help bring about a defeat of the government).' (My emphasis?RK)

4. Naturally military sabotage in favour of the non-imperialist opponent of one's own bourgeoisie is not to be extended in favour of its imperialist ally. The German proletarians, for example, would seek to disorganise militarily the eastern front, to help Soviet Russia; for the western front, where a purely imperialist war would be raging between Germany and a France allied to the USSR, 'only' the rule of defeatism would be valid for the French proletariat as well as for the German.

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