
S. F. K I S S I N

WAR

AND THE
MARXISTS

SOCIALIST THEORY
AND PRACTICE IN
CAPITALIST WARS

WESTVIEW PRESS

WAR AND THE MARXISTS

Socialist Theory and Practice
in Capitalist Wars

Volume 1
1848-1918

S. F. KISSIN

Westview Press
BOULDER, SAN FRANCISCO, & LONDON

First published in 1988 by André Deutsch Limited, 105-106 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LJ

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Published in 1989 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kissin, S.F.

War and the Marxists : socialist theory and practice in capitalist wars / by S.F. Kissin.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8133-0953-0

I. War and socialism—History. I. Title.

HX545.K54 1989

335.4'11—dc20

ISBN 0-8133-1012-1 (pbk.)

89-33747

CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

WAR AND THE MARXISTS

A Personal Preface

This study concerns the attitudes of socialists towards war in general, and towards the major wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ever since the inception of modern socialism, well over a hundred years ago, its adherents have been debating issues relating to war: how to prevent it, how to respond to it, and what opportunities there were for advancing the socialist cause in wars between capitalist powers. These questions have been a major concern of mine for nearly half a century.

On the eve of the Second World War, I was a radical socialist and convinced Marxist. World war seemed inevitable; to people of my persuasion the question of how to react was not just an academic problem of Marxist theory: it had immediate practical and personal significance. As revolutionary socialists, should we be neutral in a war between ‘imperialist’ powers, or should we support the less reactionary side, for example, the Western democracies in conflict with fascist Italy and nazi Germany? If so, what form should our support take? The probable involvement of the Soviet Union, which most of us considered a socialist country, created additional problems of principle.

At the time I was a political exile from Hitler’s Germany, a militant of the Trotskyist International Communist League (Bolshevik-Leninist), which became the Fourth International in 1938. For several months in 1937 I belonged to the Paris executive of the German section (International Communists of Germany – IKD), but when war broke out I was in London. I shared Trotsky’s view that the conflict was an imperialist venture on all sides, so revolutionary socialists and workers of all belligerent countries should refuse to support it.

In London I took part in the discussions of a group of fifteen or twenty left-wing socialists, most of them committed Trotskyists or Trotskyist sympathizers; they were all refugees from Germany or other continental countries. We conducted our debates in German and called ourselves *Marxistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (Marxist Working

Group). In January 1940, as a contribution to our discussions, I wrote (in German) a paper entitled 'Theses on the War and the Situation in the Labour Movement'. Broadly reflecting the views prevalent among socialists of the extreme Left, it defined the war as imperialist, like the First World War, and asserted that neither camp deserved socialist support, but there was no unanimity on the character of the war or whether we should defend the country that had given us sanctuary. Some comrades favoured support for the anti-nazi alliance, arguing that a German victory would be an immeasurable disaster for our cause: it would destroy for decades the rights and liberties workers still enjoyed in the countries of bourgeois democracy, let alone any prospect of socialist revolution.

I stuck to the anti-war line during the initial, 'phoney' phase of the war, but was converted to the pro-Allied, 'defencist' position (in Marxist parlance) in the summer of 1940, after the Germans had vanquished and occupied several democratic capitalist countries in Scandinavia and Western Europe. Having come to the conclusion that the defeat of Hitler and his intention to invade Britain must be the over-riding objectives for a socialist, I volunteered for the British army, and served from August 1940 to November 1945.

In 1942 my unit was stationed in Scotland, first near and later in Edinburgh, and I made contact with the Workers International League (WIL), the strongest Trotskyist group in Britain, and with left-wing, near-Trotskyist members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Discussions with WIL and ILP militants led me to write another paper in April 1943, 'The Present War and the Policy of Revolutionary Internationalism'. I reasoned that although not only the Axis powers but Britain and the US were waging an imperialist war, the Leninist concept of 'revolutionary defeatism' must be rejected for a capitalist democracy at war with a fascist power. Three and a half years of war had shown that defeat by the nazi armies engendered not revolution but counter-revolution in the defeated countries – the imposition of fascist or near-fascist régimes. Read side-by-side with the 'Theses' of January 1940, this paper illustrates the change in thinking of many left-wing socialists during that period. (Edited versions of both papers will be included as Appendices I and II in the second volume, *War and Twentieth-Century Socialists*, which covers the inter-war period and the Second World War.)

The Edinburgh Trotskyists took my arguments seriously but were not wholly convinced. A leading member intended to submit my paper

as a discussion document to the scheduled WIL conference in London, but before then my services were required in another theatre of war. I was posted away from Scotland and lost touch with the Edinburgh Trotskyists. I never did find out if my paper had figured at the London conference: the group's journal, *Workers' International News*, which reported on the proceedings and contained the main speeches, did not go into the details of the discussion.

At that stage, socialists' attitudes towards the war had again become a subject of purely theoretical debate. In 1940, after the fall of France, the support of the overwhelming majority of Britain's socialist labour movement was essential in the national crisis. That support was still there in 1943, when the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt, especially after the Italian surrender. Victory for the Anglo-Soviet-US alliance, and the downfall of nazism, seemed assured, whatever socialists in Britain or elsewhere in the West might say or do. Yet my interest in the potential impact of socialist views and policies about war persisted. It grew stronger after 1945 when new conflicts – the Chinese Civil War, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and various Middle Eastern conflicts – provoked comments and actions from socialists.

This led me to study more intensively the historical aspects of the problem: the words and deeds of socialists from the middle of the nineteenth century, when Marx and Engels first commented on contemporary conflicts. *War and the Marxists* is the product of these investigations. It is intended as a straightforward factual account of what leading socialists said and did when faced with the threat or reality of war. It is not a theoretical treatise and, while mentioning certain obvious inconsistencies and contradictions, it does not try to judge the merits of the concepts and policies.

Although not all socialists mentioned or quoted in this volume were committed Marxists, the title *War and the Marxists* seemed appropriate. Marxist phraseology and idiom predominated in the debates, and most participants adopted Marxist criteria in defining their positions. Besides, the borderline between strict Marxists and non-Marxist socialists is by no means distinct and rigid. Karl Liebknecht's statements and actions during the First World War were generally indistinguishable in content and purpose from those of Rosa Luxemburg, and they were wholly approved by Lenin, who regarded himself as an orthodox Marxist. Liebknecht did not endorse the materialist conception of history or Marxist dialectics, but to treat him

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as a non-Marxist in the context of the debates on socialist policy in that war would be sheer pedantry.

This volume spans seventy years, to the end of the First World War. Marx died in 1883, halfway through this period. Engels was an active political writer until his death twelve years later. The presentation of the views of Marx and Engels shows that they often believed war would lead to revolution in a belligerent country, but never evolved a comprehensive theory about the link between war and revolution. They always hoped for the victory of the more 'progressive' side; when tsarist Russia was at war, they wanted her enemies to win. In the early twentieth century, when socialist parties existed in most capitalist countries and socialist revolution seemed a short-term possibility, the followers of Marx and Engels tried to hammer out a consistent policy to exploit the war-conditioned crises of capitalism and hasten its overthrow.

A further volume will deal with the inter-war period, the Second World War, and very briefly the years since 1945. The major powers have not confronted one another directly in any of the many wars of the last forty years, and the arrival of the nuclear age has invalidated socialist assumptions in their debates about war. Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, most discussions about war, among socialists and non-socialists, have been concerned with preventing nuclear war and avoiding escalation of non-nuclear conflicts. Socialist attitudes have not been basically different from those of liberal or conservative politicians and commentators: the post-1945 debate about war and wartime policies has been devoid of a specifically socialist dimension.

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London 1988

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PART I

**Marx and Engels,
and the
Wars of the Nineteenth Century**

1 The 'Revolutionary Wars' of 1848–9

The Prussian-Danish War

The revolutionary tide which engulfed much of Europe in 1848 and 1849 provoked some minor wars involving German states, especially Prussia and Austria. Almost all Marx and Engels wrote about these wars was bound up with the expectation of early proletarian revolution. They believed that Europe was ripe for such a revolution. In the Communist Manifesto, which appeared at the beginning of 1848, they asserted – correctly, as it turned out – that Germany was 'on the eve of a bourgeois revolution' and went on to predict, erroneously, that this would be 'but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution'. They must have felt sure that once proletarian rule had been established in Germany, it would not be confined to that country.

Marx and Engels believed, again mistakenly, that a great European or even a 'world war' would break out shortly and would hasten the process of European revolution. For this reason they actually hoped for a war waged by one or more European powers against tsarist Russia, the most reactionary and oppressive power, the *bête noire* of democratic and progressive elements of that time.

The first war the two friends commented on in detail was the Prussian-Danish war of 1848–9. The issue was the fate of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, with predominantly German populations but linked to the Danish crown. After a revolution had begun in Prussia and other parts of Germany in the spring of 1848, the Germans of Schleswig and Holstein set up a provisional government in Kiel, proclaimed secession from Denmark and appealed to the German Confederation (a loose association of states, with Austria and Prussia as the leading members) for the admission of Schleswig-Holstein as a single state. Thousands of young Germans enlisted as volunteers and went to the aid of the rebel armies.

On behalf of the German Confederation, Prussia went to war with

Denmark. In April 1848 Prussian troops occupied the whole of Schleswig and Holstein and invaded Jutland, but withdrew after reverses on the battlefield and a Russian threat to intervene. After more inconclusive fighting in 1849 an armistice was agreed, followed by a Danish-Prussian peace treaty in June 1850, which in all essentials restored the *status quo* of Danish rule over the duchies. The Germans in Schleswig-Holstein continued to resist but were defeated. The settlement was confirmed by the treaty of London of May 1852, which placed it under the guarantee of the main European powers.

Marx and Engels were wholeheartedly in favour of the war against Denmark, and they urged the German side to conduct it with energy and resolve. In their view, the armed rising of the Germans in Schleswig-Holstein was part of the revolutionary struggle for a united democratic Germany – a cause dear to their hearts. Engels wrote in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, the radical newspaper they published in Cologne, that ‘the war we (Germans) are waging in Schleswig-Holstein is a truly revolutionary war.’¹

While approving of the Schleswig-Holstein rising and the war, Marx and Engels (both Prussian by birth) distrusted the royal Prussian government. They described its conduct of the war as inept and attacked the armistice and the ‘treacherous peace’. But they dissociated themselves from the jingoist excesses of some Germans and part of the German press.

At the time Denmark enjoyed the support of Russia, and this was a further reason for wanting the Danes defeated. Marx and Engels thought that war, not only with Denmark but with Russia, was the prerequisite of a positive solution of the European revolutionary crisis. They also believed such a war to be inevitable. In June 1848, Engels accused Prussia of lacking ‘the courage to accept . . . the long-awaited and unavoidable conflict with Russia’.²

In July 1850, Engels reiterated the indictment of Prussia for deserting the Schleswig-Holstein troops in battle and then signing a ‘treacherous peace’. He elaborated a theory he had formulated on a previous occasion – that the Danes and some other small ethnic groups had no claim to independent nationhood. According to Engels, revolutionary democrats had to work and fight for the unification of ‘the great nationalities hitherto cut up in small states’ (like the Germans and Italians), but not for the independence of ‘those small wrecks of nationalities, such as Danes, Croats, Czechs, Slovaks, and

so on, counting from one to three millions each at the very outset, or . . . those mongrel would-be nations, such as the Swiss and Belgians'. Only the 'great and equally powerful nations, such as the French, English, German, Italian, Hungarian and Polish' would belong to a future 'European confederacy of republics'. As for the people of Schleswig and Holstein, they should not be 'forced to follow the fate of small, impotent, half-civilized Denmark, and to be slaves of Russia for ever'; rather 'they should be allowed to re-unite themselves to a nation of forty millions, which was then just engaged in the struggle for its freedom, unity, and consequent recovery of its strength.'³

This startling and un-socialist contempt for the small and 'would-be' nations which the young Engels displayed in the late 1840s – apparently in agreement with Marx – is not found in the mature writings of the two friends. There is no trace of it in Engels's comments on the war of 1864, when Austria and Prussia defeated Denmark and Schleswig and Holstein were ceded to the German powers.⁴

It is clear from what Marx and Engels wrote during the Danish war of 1848–9 that they wanted their native Germany to be strong and united as a democratic republic. In this sense they were German patriots, but they were not chauvinists or even nationalists. In conflicts involving Germans they did not back the German side 'right or wrong'; their support went to the party they regarded as more progressive. Engels wrote that in recent history the Germans had usually played a reactionary role: they had supplied mercenaries to the British in the American revolutionary war; they had intervened against the French Revolution; Austria and Prussia had joined Russia in dismembering and plundering Poland, and Austria was guilty of repression in Italy and Hungary. He went on:

The blame for the infamies committed with the aid of Germany in other countries falls not only on the governments but to a large extent also on the German people. But for the delusions of the Germans, their slavish spirit, their aptitude as mercenaries and jailers . . . the German name would not have been so detested, cursed and despised abroad.

Yet a new era had dawned, he wrote,

Now that the Germans are throwing off their own yoke, their

whole policy *vis-à-vis* foreign nations must also change – or else the fetters with which we have chained other nations will shackle our own new freedom . . . Germany will liberate herself to the extent to which she sets free neighbouring nations.⁵

Revolts against Habsburg Rule: Rising in Italy

Marx and Engels hoped for a German victory in the conflict with Denmark; they backed the non-German side in the wars which shook the Habsburg monarchy during the same revolutionary period – the Italian and Hungarian wars. The aim in Hungary was national independence and internal democracy. The Italian revolution had the same objectives, as well as the unification of Italy, which consisted of a number of states, most under direct or indirect Austrian control.

Marx and Engels sympathized with the Hungarians and the Italians, whose cause they considered was progress and revolutionary democracy. They also thought the defeat of Austria would hasten the downfall of the hated Habsburg monarchy. They welcomed actions by Austrian revolutionaries to help the insurgents, and applauded when the people of Vienna began an insurrection in October 1848 to prevent the departure of Austrian troops to the Hungarian front. They spoke with regret of the ‘confusion’ in the minds of some German Austrians who had taken part in the Vienna revolution of March 1848 but had then volunteered for the campaign against the Italians.⁶

A rising in Sicily against Neapolitan rule marked the beginning of the Italian revolution in January 1848. Unrest in other parts induced the princely rulers of several states to grant constitutions, but the revolution in Vienna on 13 March 1848 really brought things to the boil and ended Prince Metternich’s forty-year dominance at the Austrian court. The news sparked armed rising in the two provinces under direct Austrian rule, Lombardy and Venetia. The citizens of Milan chased the Austrian garrison (mainly Croats) out of their town. The Austrian troops, led by the aged Fieldmarshal Radetzky, then evacuated most of Lombardy. In Venice the Austrian garrison was induced to leave, the ‘Republic of St Mark’ was proclaimed. King Charles Albert of Sardinia-Piedmont declared war on Austria. Patriotic enthusiasm gripped the whole of Italy, and volunteers streamed to the theatre of war in the north.

Progressive opinion both in Italy and abroad saw the ideal