

When Will the New World War Begin

Imperialists Now Launch Conflicts Without Formal Declarations of War

(Continued from page 1)

the direct analysis of living and concrete reality. Every new historical crisis, deep as may be its roots in the past, is yet novel and unprecedented in certain of its fundamental aspects. We are as likely to be fooled as instructed by memories; and conventional formulas can never do the work of intelligence.

Central Task

Every serious person knows that the new world imperialist war is coming, and is in fact not far off. Every Marxist or near-Marxist realizes that in the new war the fate of mankind will be at issue; that out of this war will come either the workers' revolution or a social barbarism more terrible and devastating than ever before known in history. Every revolutionist understands that in the last analysis his central task is to prepare for the challenge of the coming war with the unbreakable determination that it shall be at once the death of the monstrosity of capitalism and the birth of the new world order.

All the more fatal, then, will be any miscalculation concerning the nature and manner of the new war. A simple major error may well prove a disaster. Nor, to avoid miscalculation, is it enough to rely passively on what we have learned from the past.

The New Aspect

Right on the surface there is a peculiarity of the present world situation which is all-important. This peculiarity is suggested by asking the simple question, How will the new war begin?

At no time in the past would this question even have been raised. War was always a social activity with certain conventional standards and rules. Wars began with a formal announcement to that effect, called in modern times a "Declaration of War", by the warring parties. This, in turn, was a modified development from the more elaborate ceremonies that preceded armed conflict in feudal society. The Declaration of War, in modern times, has itself almost invariably come as the conclusion of several other standardized actions: an "Ultimatum" of some kind, "breaking off of diplomatic relations", "general mobilization", and then the Declaration of War.

The past three or four years in international relations have witnessed a more complete breakdown in usual "diplomacy", in the conventional ways of doing things, than has ever before occurred. Since the withdrawal of Japan from the League of Nations, the act has come first, and the formality is either added on later or dispensed with altogether. Armies march, ships are sunk, cities bombed, treaties violated, all without benefit of the traditional "rules".

Does this mean that the new imperialist war will never be formally initiated, never "declared"?

No Formalities

There was, as we know, no declaration of war when Japan invaded Manchuria, none when Italy invaded Ethiopia, and there has been none in connection with the Spanish events. None of these situations is however, exactly comparable to an

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inter-imperialist war, at least as such a war has been up to now understood. The invasions of Manchuria and Ethiopia were carried out by imperialist powers against backward nations. In the past, such acts have been frequent enough in the history of all the great power; and very often the great power did not see fit to dignify the colonial aggression with a formal Declaration. Therefore, we are not able to conclude definitely from the evidence of the Manchurian and Ethiopian affairs that the inter-imperialist war itself will be undeclared.

But there is, when we examine the question more closely, a significant difference between the Manchurian and Ethiopian invasions, on the one hand, and earlier colonial enterprises on the other. During the 18th and 19th centuries there was still left in the world vast "virgin" territories, enormous areas as yet not brought under the sway of capitalist exploitation, and often not even definitely under the influence of any single great nation. But by the eve of 1914, almost the entire world had been divided up among the great powers, either as colonies, dominions, subject nations, or as some other type of "sphere of influence". This meant that capitalism had reached its progressive limit, and was entering its decline as a world system. The War of 1914-18 was not a war of capitalist expansion, but a war for the re-division, of the world among the great powers, and out of the war there did in fact come a re-division, enshrined and "legalized" in the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations.

End of Versailles

The Versailles system summed up the relationship of forces which held at the end of the war, after the military defeat of the Central Powers. It could hold only until intolerable inner conflicts compelled some one of the powers or group of powers to attempt to change it. Japan in Manchuria gave the first powerful blow to the Versailles system; but the system itself was able still to stand up under that blow.

It was Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, more or less simultaneous with Hitler's de facto repudiation of the provisions of the Versailles Treaty, which showed that the Versailles system had broken down, and that a new period was beginning. Political questions were now no longer going to be settled by diplomacy, but "by other means", by armed conflict. In a world all farmed out among the various great powers, all linked together by the chains of world capitalism, Italy's campaign could not be regarded as a mere "private" subjugation of the single backward country of Ethiopia. It was an armed attack on the whole political structure of the world as it has existed since 1918.

Prelude To The War

When Italy struck in Ethiopia, Marxists said that this was "the prelude to the new world war. By that, they meant what has been stated above, that the stage of national and international conflicts had reached a level beyond solution within the framework of the League of Nations and the post-war Peace Treaties, that

henceforth the conflicts could never be forced back within that framework, that it was now a race toward war on a world scale.

The phrase, "prelude to the new world war", however, may have had a more literal meaning that was suspected even by those who used it. It is the remarkable and indisputable fact that since the beginning of the Ethiopian invasion there have been in the world taken as a whole bodies of armed men in conflict in numbers steadily increasing month by month, almost without exception. In form these armed men have been engaged chiefly in two "colonial wars" (Ethiopia and China) and in a civil war (Spain). But in the Ethiopian war, the fleets of Great Britain and Italy were brought into the Mediterranean; in the Spanish War, there have been tens of thousands of men and hundreds of millions of dollars worth of munitions poured in by the great powers, and there have been armed encounters between the ships, airplanes and submarines of the powers; and in China there is present a considerable concentration of the armed forces of the powers, some of whose tactics have amounted to at least partial intervention.

What Next?

It is still, of course, possible that a temporary "solution" can be found for both the Spanish and the Chinese struggles—though it is not possible that any solution could endure for long. But the sequence of events during the past three years now raises also, as another and distinct possibility, the alternative that the process which began with the invasion of Ethiopia may continue, and that the armed struggles now going on may pass by a series of almost insensible gradations into conflict on a world scale, into the new imperialist world war. This process might, furthermore, be completed with no formalities whatever, above all with no formal Declarations of War. Military tacticians have already speculated with this notion from the point of view of its military desirability; it now becomes related, in a

manner not foreseen by the militarists, to concrete events.

What This Means

The profound importance of this possibility for Marxists should be apparent. If we do not take it into account, we may wake up some morning to find, not that war has suddenly started, but that it stared some long while ago. The revolutionists would be caught completely off guard, organizationally and politically. Tactics applicable to a colonial civil war might be applied long after what began as dominantly a colonial or civil struggle had been subordinated to the inter-imperialist conflicts.

On the other hand, if this possibility turns out to be the case, or is even partly true, we may anticipate a different tempo in certain developments associated with the period following the Declaration of War: as for example, the passing of reformists and labor bureaucrats over to full-blown social-patriotism, measures by Governments for "consolidation of the nation", etc. In fact, the voting of the war budgets by the French Communist and Socialist Parties in January, and the pro-Armament vote of the British Trades Union Congress this month, which we have tended to point to as an example of a difference in the character of the labor movement now as compared with 1914 (when such votes occurred only after the Declaration of War), might seem to strengthen the possibility which I have been discussing, and to suggest that the difference lies rather in the changed form of the development of the new war.

"War is a continuation of politics by other means". A war period of peace. Heretofore we have always had an easy convention to distinguish the two—the convention of the War Declaration. If this convention is, or may be, removed, we shall have to look more closely than ever at events themselves. In an article next week, I propose to make such an examination of the Spanish events, and to suggest certain political conclusions that follow.

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