

War!

Pëtr Kropotkin

1914

The spectacle presented at this moment by Europe is deplorable enough but withal particularly instructive. On the one hand, diplomatists and courtiers hurrying hither and thither with the increased activity which displays itself whenever the air of our old continent begins to smell of powder. Alliances are being made and unmade, with much chaffering over the amount of human cattle that shall form the price of the bargain. "So many million head on condition of your house supporting ours; so many acres to feed them, such and such seaports for the export of their wool." Each plotting to overreach his rivals in the market. That is what in political jargon is known as diplomacy.¹

On the other hand, endless development of armed force. Every day we hear of fresh inventions for the more effectual destruction of our fellow-men, fresh expenditure, fresh loans, fresh taxation. Clamorous patriotism, reckless jingoism; the stirring up of international jealousy have become the most lucrative line in politics and journalism. Childhood itself has not been spared; schoolboys are swept into the ranks, to be trained up in hatred of the Prussian, the English or the Slav; drilled in blind obedience to the government of the moment, whatever the colour of its flag, and when they come to the years of manhood to be laden like pack-horses with cartridges, provisions and the rest of it; to have a rifle thrust into their hands and be taught to charge at the bugle call and slaughter one another right and left like wild beasts, without asking themselves why or for what purpose. Whether they have before them starvelings out of Germany or Italy, or their own brothers roused to revolt by famine — the bugle sounds, the killing must commence.

¹ While it will be understood that the political situation of Europe has changed since these lines were written, the same arguments are entirely applicable to the present time.

This is the outcome of all the wisdom of our governors and teachers! This is all they have found to give us an ideal; this at a time when the wretched of all countries are joining hands across the frontiers.

“You would not have Socialism? Well then you will have War — war for thirty, for fifty years.” So said Herzen after 1848. And war we have. If the thunder of the cannon is silent for a moment through out the world, it is but for a breathing space, it is but to begin afresh more fiercely somewhere else, while European war — a general melee of the western nations — has been threatening for years, though not one knows what the fight will be about, with what allies, or against which foe, in the name of what principles, or in whose interest.

In former times when there was war, men knew at least in what cause they were killing one another.

“Such and such a king has insulted ours — come and slaughter his subjects.” “Such and such an emperor wishes to pilfer provinces from us — let us keep them, at the cost of our lives, for His Most Christian Majesty.” Men fought in the quarrels of their kings. It was foolish, but then these kings could only enlist for such purposes a few thousand men. But why, nowadays, should we have whole peoples flying at each other’s throats.

Kings count for nothing now in questions of war. Victoria did not send protests about M. Rochefort’s rhodomontades; the English are not going to exact vengeance for her, and yet can you prophecy that in two years’ time France and England will not be at war for supremacy in Egypt? Similarly in the East. Autocrat and ugly despot as he is, great power as he thinks himself, the Czar of all the Russias will swallow all the affronts of Andrassy and Salisbury without stirring a finger, so long as the stockjobbers of Petersburg and the manufacturers of Moscow — the gang who nowadays style themselves “patriots” — have not given him the word to set his armies on the move.

In Russia as in England, in Germany as in France, men fight no longer for the good pleasure of kings; they fight to guarantee the incomes and augment the possessions of their Financial Highnesses, Messrs. Rothschild, Schneider and Co., and to fatten the lords of the money market and the factory. The rivalries of kings have been supplanted by the rivalries of bourgeois cliques.

No doubt we shall still hear talk of “disturbance of the Balance of Power.” But translate this metaphysical concept into material facts, examine, for instance, how the “undue political preponderance” of Germany is manifesting itself at this moment, and you will see that the pith of the matter is simply an *economic* “preponderance” on the international markets. What Germany, France, Russia, England and Austria are struggling for at this moment, is not military supremacy but economic supremacy, the right to impose their manufactures, their custom duties, upon their neighbours; the right to develop the resources of peoples backward in industry; the

privilege of making railways through countries that have none, and under that pretext to get demand of their markets, the right, in a word, to filch every now and then from a neighbour a seaport that would stimulate their trade or a province that would absorb the surplus of their production.

When we fight nowadays it is to ensure our Factory Kings a bonus of thirty per cent, to strengthen the “Barons” of finance in their hold on the money market, and to keep up the rate of interest for shareholders in mines and railways. If we were only consistent, we should replace the lion on our standard with a golden calf, their other emblems by money bags, and the names of our regiments, borrowed formerly from royalty, by the titles of the Kings of Industry and Finance — “Third Rothschild,” “Tent Baring,” etc. We should at least know whom we were killing for.

The opening of new markets, the forcing of products, good and bad, upon the foreigner, is the principle underlying all the politics of the present day throughout our continent, and the real cause of the wars of the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century England was the first nation to introduce the system of extensive production for export. The proletariat was huddled into the towns, harnessed to improved machinery, and set to fill the warehouses with mountains of cotton and woollen goods. But these goods were not intended for the thread-bare artisan that wove them. Receiving just enough to keep themselves and their families alive, what could those who were spinning the cotton and the cloth purchase? So the merchant fleets of England set out to plough the ocean in search of consumers on the continent of Europe, in Asia, in America, in the certainty of finding no competitors. Misery — the blackest misery — was rife in the manufacturing districts, but the manufacturer and the merchant grew rich by leaps and bounds, the wealth extracted from the foreigner accumulated in the hands of a small number, amid the applause of continental economists and their exhortations to their countrymen to go and do the like.

But as early as the end of the eighteenth century France was entering on the same phase of development. There also production was organising itself on a large scale with a view to exportation. The Revolution, by transferring the centre of power, by crowding the towns with country folk, by enriching the middle-class, gave a fresh impulse to this economic evolution. Then the English middle-class took fright, much more at this evolution than at the proclamation of the Republic and the blood spilt in Paris, and joining with the aristocracy, declared war to the death with the French bourgeoisie who were threatening to close the markets of Europe to English products.

Everyone knows how the war ended. France was beaten, but she had won her place upon the markets. The two bourgeoisies, the English and the French even made for a moment a touching alliance; they recognised each other as sisters.

But before long France begins to go too fast. As one result of this production for export, she finds herself compelled to find markets by fair means or foul, without taking account of the progress of industry which was spreading from West to East, and quickening other nations. The French middle-class seeks to enlarge the circle of its beneficence. It submits for eighteen years to be ridden by the third Napoleon, in the continual hope that that usurper will find means to force Europe into accord with his economic policy, and only throws him over when it sees that he cannot serve that purpose.

A new nation, Germany, adopts the same economic system. Here again we have the country drained of its inhabitants, and the towns crammed with starvelings, doubling the urban population in a few years. Here again we have production organised on a large scale. A gigantic industrial organisation, equipped with perfected machinery and backed up by the free diffusion of technical and scientific instruction, here again piles up its products, destined, not for the use of the producers but for exportation, for the enrichment of the masters. Capital accumulates, and seeks profitable investment in Asia, in Africa, in Turkey, in Russia; the Bourse at Berlin rises into rivalry with the Bourse at Paris — it aims at outrivalling it.

Then rises a cry from the heart of the German bourgeoisie. Unity, under any flag, no matter which, even were it that of Prussia, so long as the power so accruing will ensure to that class the means of forcing on neighbouring states its products and its custom tariffs, of grabbing a good harbour on the Baltic, and, if possible, on the Adriatic; of breaking the military power of France which has been threatening for twenty years past to lay down mercantile law, and to dictate commercial treaties for all Europe.

The war of 1870 was the result. France is no longer mistress of the markets; it is Germany who is aiming at supremacy there. She, too, in her thirst for gain, is engaged in the unending endeavour to extend her area of exploitation, with utter disregard of the industrial crisis, the financial failures, the uncertainty and misery that are gnawing at the foundations of her economic edifice. The coasts of Africa, the harvests of Corsica, the plains of Poland, the arid steppes of Russia, the “puszta” of Hungary, the rose-tangled valleys of Bulgaria, the steaming forests of the neglected heritage of Spain — all are raising the avarice of the German bourgeoisie. So often as the German merchant traverses these ill-cultured plains, these towns that have not risen to the glories of the “grande industrie,” these rivers still unfouled by mill refuse, his heart bleeds within him at the spectacle. His fancy paints to him how well he could find means to reap rich harvests of gold from these fallow plains, how he could grind these profitless beings in the mill of Capital. He registers an oath that he will one day find for “civilisation,” that is “exploitation,” a new home in the East. Meanwhile he will do his best to force his commodities and his railways on Italy, Austria and Russia.

But these, too, are emancipating themselves in their turn from the economic tutelage of their neighbours. These, too, are creeping by degrees into the circle of the “industrial” countries; and those infant bourgeoisies ask no better than the means to enrich themselves [sic] in their turn by exportation. In the last few years Russia and Italy have made enormous strides in the extension of their industries, and since the peasant can buy nothing — reduced as he is to the blackest misery — here also it is for exportation that the manufacturers are endeavouring to produce.

Consequently Russia, Italy and Austria also must find markets, and those of Europe being already occupied, they are forced to fall back on Asia, or on Africa, with the certainty of some day coming to blows over the appropriation of the choice morsels.

What alliances can be binding in such a situation as this, created of necessity by the character impressed upon industry by those who have the direction of it? The alliance between Germany and Russia is a matter purely of temporary convenience. Alexander and William may kiss each other as often as they like — the bourgeoisie that is growing up in Russia will cordially detest the German bourgeoisie, which repays it in the same coin. Everyone remembers the furious outcry raised by the whole German press when the Russian Government raised its import duties by one-third. “War with Russia” — ever the cry of the German middle-class and the workmen dependent thereon — “would be even more popular with us than the war of 1870.”

Assuredly — you would not have Socialism, and you will have war. You could have wars to last you thirty years or more, if the Revolution were not on its way to put an end to this preposterous and contemptible situation. But let us, too, clearly recognise the position. Arbitration, the “balance of power,” reduction of standing armies, disarmament — all these are fine ideas, but practical bearing they have none. The Revolution alone, when it has restored the machinery and raw material of production and all the wealth of Society to the hands of the producers, and organised production in a manner that will provide for the needs of those on whom all production depends, can put an end to these conflicts for markets.

Each one labouring for all and all for each — that is the only talisman that can bring peace to the hearts of the nations that cry for peace with earnest entreaty but cannot win it, for the hurrying of the vultures that prey on the wealth of the world.

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