

WORKERS OF THE WORLD AGAINST WAR: SOCIALIST ANTI-MILITARISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF PACIFIST THOUGHT (1848–1939)

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Abstract

Between the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, socialist movements played a crucial role in shaping discourses on war, militarism, and peace, socialist anti-militarism developing as both a theoretical framework and a political strategy, deeply embedded in critiques of capitalism, imperialism, and class exploitation. While some factions rejected war outright as an instrument of bourgeois domination, others viewed military conflict as a means to advance revolutionary transformation and this ideological tension shaped the broader socialist response to war and peace across the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This paper traces the evolution of socialist anti-militarism, beginning with the intellectual foundations laid by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who identified war as a structural outcome of capitalist competition. It examines the role of the First and Second Internationals in formulating socialist opposition to militarism, particularly through resolutions advocating workers' resistance to war. The outbreak of World War I, however, fractured socialist internationalism, as most socialist parties abandoned their anti-war commitments in favor of national allegiances.

In the interwar period, socialist movements engaged in both institutional peace efforts, such as supporting the League of Nations, and militant resistance against fascism, particularly during the Spanish Civil War. The contradictions within socialist pacifism—between ideological commitment to peace and the necessity of armed struggle—highlight the complexities of anti-militarist thought. By analyzing socialist engagements with war and peace from 1848 to 1939, this paper develops on the enduring relevance of socialist critiques of militarism in contemporary political thought, particularly in discussions on international relations and peace-building strategies.

Keywords: socialism, pacifism, history of political thought, peace

1. INTRODUCTION

Socialist anti-militarism emerged as a central ideological and political force between 1848 and 1939, driven by opposition to capitalist-driven war, class oppression, and imperialist expansion. Rooted in Marxist critiques of militarism as an instrument of bourgeois control, socialist pacifists argued that war served ruling-class interests, reinforcing economic exploitation and suppressing working-class solidarity (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 54). The development of socialist anti-militarism was closely intertwined with wider struggles for workers' rights and internationalism, making it a fundamental component of nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist movements.

However, socialist pacifism was never a monolithic ideology—it contained deep internal contradictions: Some factions adhered to absolute pacifism, rejecting war under all circumstances as a bourgeois mechanism for maintaining control, while others, influenced by revolutionary Marxism and Leninism, saw armed struggle as an unavoidable necessity in the overthrow of capitalist and imperialist systems (Engels, 1878, p. 211). The tensions between reformist and revolutionary socialist pacifism intensified as political conditions shifted, particularly with the rise of militarized nation-states and expanding European imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These contradictions became particularly apparent with the collapse of the Second International in 1914 when many socialist parties—despite their professed anti-war commitments—endorsed their respective national war efforts at the outbreak of World War I. This moment of ideological crisis forced socialist movements to reassess their stance on militarism, leading to bitter internal divisions between those who maintained pacifist principles and those who justified war as a means of achieving revolutionary goals (Luxemburg, 1915, p. 72). The rise of fascist militarism in the 1930s further tested socialist anti-war commitments, as the increasing threat of authoritarian expansion and repression challenged long-held pacifist ideals, leading to a renewed debate on whether armed resistance was necessary to defeat fascism.

1.1 Historiographical Overview

The historiography of socialist anti-militarism reflects the ideological and strategic debates that shaped the socialist movement's response to war and militarism from 1848 to 1939. While socialist thought consistently positioned war as a capitalist tool of oppression, the movement was internally divided on how to resist militarization, leading to complex debates between absolute pacifists, reformist socialists, and revolutionary factions.

Early socialist critiques of war were closely linked to broader Marxist analyses of capitalism and class struggle. Jean Jaurès (1907) articulated a foundational socialist pacifist position, arguing that wars were waged not in the interests of the working class but to serve the financial and imperial ambitions of the bourgeoisie (Jaurès, 1907, p. 123). This analysis built upon Marx and Engels' assertion in the Communist Manifesto (1848) that wars were products of the capitalist system, ensuring the protection of ruling-class interests by diverting working-class grievances toward nationalism and militarism. However, socialist pacifism was not universally accepted within socialist movements. While some factions advocated for peaceful resistance and anti-militarist education among workers, others, particularly Marxist revolutionaries, viewed pacifism as a naïve and ineffective strategy for dismantling capitalist power structures. Engels (1878) criticized utopian pacifist ideals, asserting that working-class emancipation might necessitate armed struggle against bourgeois oppression. This tension between passive resistance and active revolutionary struggle persisted throughout socialist anti-militarist discourse.

Going further, the Second International (1889–1914) provided a platform for socialist parties across Europe to coordinate their opposition to capitalism and war. While the theoretical framework of socialist pacifism appeared united, in practice, socialist parties were deeply divided on military policy. The 1907 Stuttgart Congress reinforced socialist commitments to mass resistance against war, with resolutions calling for general strikes and anti-war mobilization should conflict break out (Haupt, 1972, p. 217). This position was reaffirmed at the 1912 Basel Congress, where socialists pledged to oppose all imperialist wars through collective action. The outbreak of World War I in 1914, however, shattered socialist unity, with many major socialist parties, particularly in Germany and France, abandoning their anti-war commitments and instead supporting their national war efforts, citing the need to defend their respective nations. This “Great Betrayal” led to intense ideological ruptures within the socialist movement. Reformists like Karl Kautsky sought to justify their support for war by arguing that socialists could achieve their goals through national unity and postwar reforms, while radical figures like Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin denounced such compromises as treasonous capitulation to bourgeois nationalism (Luxemburg, 1915, p. 72).

On the other hand, the Bolshevik response to World War I marked a decisive shift in socialist anti-militarist thought. Lenin (1917) condemned the war as an imperialist conflict, arguing that proletarian revolution was the only means to end militarism permanently (Lenin, 1917, p. 47), but he dismissed pacifist socialism as idealistic and counterproductive, insisting that only armed class struggle could overthrow capitalist war machines and create a socialist state. In contrast, Rosa Luxemburg (1918) remained deeply critical of Lenin's militarization of revolutionary struggle, warning that authoritarian approaches to revolution risked undermining the democratic foundations of socialism (Luxemburg, 1918, p. 54). Her opposition to militarized Bolshevism illustrated the ongoing schism within socialist pacifism—while some maintained that revolutionary war was the only viable response to capitalist violence, others sought to preserve a non-violent, internationalist approach to socialist resistance.

Nonetheless, the interwar period (1919–1939) saw renewed debates within socialist movements regarding the role of international peace institutions. Many socialist reformists supported the League of Nations, believing it could serve as a diplomatic mechanism to prevent future wars (Carr, 1939, p. 189), but revolutionary socialists remained deeply skeptical, arguing that the League was dominated by imperialist powers and functioned as a bourgeois peacekeeping structure rather than a genuine instrument of proletarian internationalism.

By the late 1930s, the rise of fascism in Italy, Germany, and Spain posed a critical challenge to socialist pacifism and the growing consensus among leftist intellectuals was that non-violent resistance alone was insufficient to combat fascist militarism, leading to a shift in socialist discourse toward active anti-fascist resistance. This marked the culmination of a decades-long debate within socialism—whether pacifism could ever be a viable strategy for achieving social justice, or whether armed struggle was ultimately necessary.

1.2 Methodology & Approach

A core component of this study is an intellectual history approach, which examines the theoretical foundations of socialist pacifism through the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, and other prominent socialist thinkers. This involves an analysis of key primary texts, beginning with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848), which argues that wars are fundamentally capitalist phenomena, designed to divert class struggle and maintain bourgeois hegemony (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 54). Jean Jaurès' writings on socialist pacifism are also central to this study, as he explores how early socialist theorists sought to integrate anti-militarism into mass workers' movements, particularly within the framework of the Second International (Jaurès, 1906, p. 123). The work of Rosa Luxemburg, especially her anti-war critique in *The Crisis in German Social Democracy* (1918) and *The Russian Revolution* (1922), further refines this discourse by asserting that capitalist militarism necessitates an international workers' revolution while also warning against authoritarian interpretations of revolutionary war (Luxemburg, 1918, p. 72; 1922, p. 54). Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) advances this analysis by arguing that war is not merely a product of state aggression but a structural outcome of imperialist economic competition, leading him to conclude that socialists must abandon pacifism in favor of revolutionary insurrection (Lenin, 1917, p. 47). By engaging directly with these texts, this study traces how socialist theorists conceptualized militarism, war, and revolutionary struggle, illustrating how their ideas evolved in response to historical events.

Beyond theoretical debates, this study examines the political and organizational responses of socialist movements to war and militarization, focusing on key historical moments that shaped socialist anti-militarist thought. The First International (1864–1876) set the stage for early socialist debates on anti-militarism versus revolutionary violence, particularly in response to conflicts such as the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and the Paris Commune (1871), which exposed divisions between those advocating peaceful resistance and those who saw armed insurrection as a necessary means of proletarian liberation (van der Linden, 2022, p. 73). The Second International (1889–1914) attempted to formalize socialist opposition to war through resolutions at congresses such as Stuttgart (1907) and Basel (1912), yet these efforts ultimately failed to maintain a unified anti-war stance, as national loyalties and political pragmatism fractured socialist unity (Haupt, 1972, p. 217). The outbreak of World War I (1914–1918) marked the most profound crisis for socialist pacifism, as many socialist movements split over their response; while some factions supported their national governments in the name of defensive war, others, such as Luxemburg and Lenin, denounced the conflict as an imperialist war that betrayed working-class internationalism (Ceadel, 2009, p. 229). In the interwar period (1919–1936), socialist attitudes toward the League of Nations reflected these divisions, with reformist socialists seeing it as a potential vehicle for international peace, while revolutionary factions rejected it as a bourgeois institution incapable of preventing war (Carr, 1939, p. 189). The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) further tested socialist pacifist commitments, as many socialist movements struggled with the moral dilemma of whether armed resistance was necessary to combat the rise of fascism, ultimately leading to a shift in thinking that recognized military resistance as an unavoidable necessity against authoritarianism (Preston, 2006, p. 143). This political analysis allows for a historically grounded examination of how socialist movements navigated the practical realities of war, balancing their theoretical commitments to peace with the pressures of real-world conflicts.

Moreover, in order to fully capture the tensions within socialist anti-militarism, this study employs a comparative framework that contrasts the approaches of reformist socialist pacifists with those of revolutionary socialist militarists. Reformist socialist pacifism, advocated by figures such as Jean Jaurès, Karl Kautsky, and members of the Second International, was rooted in the belief that working-class internationalism and peaceful mass resistance were the most effective methods for preventing war and advancing socialism. Reformists argued that diplomacy, economic cooperation, and labor strikes could serve

as powerful tools to counter militarization, fostering a movement that sought to achieve socialism through democratic means rather than through violent upheaval (Jaurès, 1906, p. 123). In contrast, revolutionary socialist militarism, supported by Lenin, Trotsky, and certain factions of the Communist movement, rejected pacifist strategies entirely, asserting that war was an inevitable outcome of capitalism and that only armed revolution could dismantle imperialist war economies and establish a true proletarian state (Lenin, 1917, p. 47). These divergent perspectives highlight the fractured nature of socialist pacifism, demonstrating how different factions within the movement interpreted war, militarism, and resistance in fundamentally different ways. By contrasting these ideological positions, this study illustrates how socialist anti-militarism was shaped not only by theoretical commitments but also by shifting political contexts and external pressures, as socialists sought to reconcile their aspirations for a peaceful world with the material realities of war, class struggle, and state power.

2. THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIALIST ANTI-MILITARISM

The ideological roots of socialist anti-militarism were shaped by Marxist critiques of war, capitalism, and imperialism, emerging from historical materialism and class struggle theory. Socialist theorists argued that war was not a natural or inevitable aspect of human society but a structural outcome of capitalist expansionism and class domination. The debates within the First International (1864–1876) further developed socialist approaches to militarism, particularly in the ideological disputes between Marxist centralists and anarchist decentralists regarding the role of the state in anti-militarist resistance.

2.1 Marx and Engels: War as a Structural Outcome of Capitalist Imperialism

Marxist interpretations of war and militarism are rooted in historical materialism, which posits that economic structures shape political and social relations. From this perspective, war is not an outcome of nationalist rivalries or cultural tensions but a structural necessity of capitalism, driven by state competition for resources, markets, and geopolitical control. Marx and Engels viewed war as an instrument of bourgeois domination, designed to safeguard ruling-class interests and suppress revolutionary movements. In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), they argued that wars were not fought for national security or ideological principles but to maintain capitalist economic hegemony, with nineteenth-century conflicts serving as mechanisms for colonial expansion, labor exploitation, and industrial dominance (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 54). They contended that capitalist states manipulated nationalist sentiments to mobilize workers against one another, diverting attention from the real struggle: class conflict against their exploiters. Engels further developed this analysis in *Anti-Dühring* (1878), where he directly linked war to economic systems, asserting that as long as capitalism endures, militarism will remain inevitable. He famously noted that workers are "led to war under the illusion of national interest, but in reality, they are shedding blood for the profits of their masters" (Engels, 1878, p. 211). This perspective formed the foundation of socialist critiques of militarism, framing war not as a failure of diplomacy but as a logical function of capitalist competition, which requires ongoing militarization to secure economic dominance.

2.2 First International (1864–1876): Early Socialist Rejection of War

The First International (International Workingmen's Association, IWA) played a pivotal role in shaping socialist anti-militarism by seeking to unite workers across national lines against capitalist warfare. In its 1866 resolution on war and militarism, the IWA explicitly condemned war as a bourgeois conspiracy against the working class, declaring that "the wars of the ruling classes serve only to consolidate their power and divide the workers of the world. It is our duty to resist militarism and to reject all attempts to conscript the proletariat into the service of capital" (First International, 1866, cited in van der Linden, 2022, p. 73). This resolution marked one of the earliest collective socialist declarations against war, advocating for worker-led resistance to conscription and nationalist propaganda as a means of undermining militarized state power. However, despite this shared commitment to anti-militarism, deep ideological divisions quickly emerged within the International over how best to combat war. The primary fault line lay between Marxist anti-militarism, which saw state power as a necessary tool for dismantling war economies, and anarchist anti-militarism, which rejected the state entirely, believing that all centralized authority—whether capitalist or socialist—would ultimately reproduce militaristic structures. These tensions would continue to shape socialist debates on war and militarism, influencing later conflicts within the Second International, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Spanish Civil War.

2.3 Marxist vs. Anarchist Anti-Militarism: State Control vs. Decentralized Resistance

Going further, one of the defining ideological conflicts within the First International was the debate between Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin over the role of the state in revolutionary struggle and anti-militarist efforts. Marxist anti-militarism, as articulated by Marx and Engels, maintained that workers needed to seize control of

the state to dismantle its militarist functions from within. They argued that a revolutionary workers' government was the only way to permanently abolish war, as it could redirect economic resources away from militarization and toward social welfare (Marx, 1867, p. 98). By contrast, anarchist anti-militarism, championed by Bakunin (1870), rejected state-centered solutions entirely, asserting that all forms of centralized power—whether capitalist or socialist—would inevitably reproduce militaristic structures. Bakunin called for localized, decentralized resistance against militarism, believing that only grassroots, anti-state uprisings could truly abolish war (Bakunin, 1870, p. 182). This fundamental ideological rift between Marxist and anarchist anti-militarism persisted throughout socialist history, shaping later debates over whether socialist governments could genuinely eradicate war or whether state control, even under proletarian leadership, would inevitably lead to renewed militarization. The contradictions between state socialism and anarchist federalism would resurface in the Second International, the Russian Revolution, and the Spanish Civil War, demonstrating the enduring struggle within the left over the means and ends of anti-militarist resistance.

3. THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL AND SOCIALIST ANTI-MILITARISM (1889–1914)

The Second International (1889–1914) played a crucial role in the development of socialist anti-militarism, bringing together socialist parties from across Europe in an attempt to coordinate a unified workers' response to war and militarization. While the International was theoretically committed to opposing imperialist wars, its members were divided on strategy, with tensions between pacifist reformists and revolutionary socialists growing throughout the prewar period. Despite efforts to institutionalize anti-militarist policies, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 shattered socialist unity, marking one of the greatest ideological crises in the history of the movement.

During the early years of the Second International, socialist leaders actively promoted pacifist policies, convinced that working-class solidarity could prevent future wars. They viewed militarism as an instrument of bourgeois class rule, designed to suppress workers' movements and redirect class struggles into nationalist conflicts. This belief led to a series of congresses and resolutions aimed at institutionalizing socialist opposition to war, culminating in two key moments: the 1907 Stuttgart Congress and the 1912 Basel Congress, which sought to establish a unified socialist strategy against militarization.

At the Stuttgart Congress of 1907, one of the most significant prewar socialist anti-militarist resolutions was passed, with Jean Jaurès and other socialist leaders advocating for a mass general strike as a means of preventing war (Jaurès, 1907, p. 123). The Congress declared that "in the event of an imminent war, the working class must respond with immediate strikes and mass protests, ensuring that capitalist states cannot use their labor power to sustain war efforts." This resolution marked a radicalization of socialist anti-militarism, as Jaurès and the French socialist delegates argued that militant worker resistance was the only effective way to halt imperialist expansion. However, while most delegates supported the resolution in principle, socialist parties from Germany and Austria expressed concerns, fearing that direct action might provoke state repression or weaken socialist electoral gains.

With the escalation of European tensions, the Basel Congress of 1912 reaffirmed the Second International's anti-war stance, passing one of its strongest anti-militarist resolutions (Haupt, 1972, p. 217). The Congress proclaimed that "the workers of the world must unite to prevent imperialist war by all means necessary. We must refuse to serve in capitalist wars and resist all forms of militarist propaganda.", this declaration arguably being the peak of socialist anti-militarist unity, with all major socialist parties pledging to resist war mobilization. However, despite its bold rhetoric, the resolution lacked concrete enforcement mechanisms, leaving individual parties free to interpret its meaning and act according to national political pressures. This failure to establish binding anti-militarist strategies would prove disastrous in 1914, when many socialist parties abandoned their pacifist commitments and supported their respective national war efforts, marking the greatest crisis in socialist internationalism and the ultimate collapse of the Second International's anti-war front.

As war erupted in 1914, most socialist leaders abandoned their long-standing anti-war commitments, arguing that national defense took precedence over proletarian internationalism. Despite the Second International's repeated resolutions against militarism, socialist parties across Europe aligned with their respective national governments, prioritizing wartime unity over working-class solidarity. In Germany, the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany)—the largest socialist party in Europe—voted overwhelmingly in favor of war credits, with only Karl Liebknecht and a small faction dissenting (Luxemburg, 1915, p. 72). Similarly, in France, socialists who had once adhered to Jean Jaurès' anti-militarist stance justified their participation in the war effort as a means of protecting French democracy from German aggression. The decision to support the war marked a dramatic reversal for socialist movements that had previously vowed to resist nationalist militarization.

The socialist capitulation to war provoked fierce criticism from revolutionary factions, particularly from Rosa Luxemburg, who viewed it as a betrayal of the working-class cause. In her pamphlet *The Crisis in German Social Democracy*, Luxemburg denounced the transformation of socialist parties into instruments of state militarism, lamenting that: "The socialist movement has collapsed under the weight of bourgeois nationalism. What was once a movement of international solidarity is now a tool for militarist propaganda and mass slaughter" (Luxemburg, 1915, p. 72). The failure of socialist parties to resist war mobilization effectively led to the collapse of the Second International, exposing the fragility of its anti-war commitments and leaving behind deep ideological fractures that would shape socialist politics for decades.

Furthermore, the betrayal of 1914 resulted in an irreparable split between reformist and revolutionary socialist factions. Reformist socialists, led by Karl Kautsky and the majority of the SPD, justified their wartime stance by arguing that socialists should work within democratic institutions to negotiate a postwar peace rather than outright oppose the war. Kautsky maintained that the war, while regrettable, could ultimately lead to democratic reforms, allowing socialists to advance their agenda through parliamentary means. In contrast, revolutionary socialists, including Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht, viewed reformist pacifism as bourgeois collaboration, insisting that only armed revolution could dismantle the imperialist system responsible for war. Lenin (1917) explicitly called for transforming the imperialist war into a proletarian revolution, arguing that the working class must seize state power to overthrow capitalist militarism (Lenin, 1917, p. 47). Luxemburg further underscored the contradictions of pacifist reformism, warning that "to seek peace within a system built on exploitation and violence is an illusion. True peace can only come through the abolition of capitalism itself" (Luxemburg, 1915, p. 76).

By 1916, these divisions had crystallized into separate political organizations, with Lenin's Bolsheviks and Luxemburg's Spartacists advocating for revolutionary war, while the moderate socialists of the Second International pursued diplomatic solutions. This ideological rupture culminated in the formation of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919, marking a definitive break between reformist and revolutionary socialist strategies on war and peace. While reformists remained committed to parliamentary socialism and gradual reform, revolutionaries embraced direct action, arguing that militarized resistance was necessary to overthrow capitalist and imperialist structures. This fundamental divergence over war and militarism would continue to shape socialist movements throughout the interwar period, influencing responses to fascism, colonial struggles, and Cold War geopolitics.

Overall, the collapse of socialist unity in 1914 demonstrated the limitations of institutional pacifism, as workers' movements proved unable to resist the nationalist pressures of total war. The events of this period profoundly reshaped socialist anti-militarism, reinforcing the belief among radicals that war could not be prevented through parliamentary resolutions alone. This realization set the stage for Bolshevik revolutionary strategies, influencing Leninist and Trotskyist approaches to war and militarism in the interwar period. As the study moves into the post-World War I period, the next section will explore how the Bolshevik Revolution, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and interwar socialist movements grappled with the contradictions of socialist pacifism in an era of rising militarism and fascism.

4. THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION AND SOCIALIST PACIFISM (1917–1921)

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 marked a defining moment in socialist anti-militarism, transforming the ideological relationship between socialist pacifism and revolutionary violence. Prior to the revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had consistently denounced World War I as an imperialist war, fought in the interests of the capitalist class at the expense of the working class. Unlike socialist reformists, who sought diplomatic resolutions through international cooperation, Lenin dismissed pacifist strategies as ineffective, arguing that only revolutionary war could dismantle imperialist structures and establish a proletarian state (Lenin, 1917, p. 47). The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918) further revealed the contradictions between pragmatic peace settlements and revolutionary expansionism, exposing deep ideological fractures within Bolshevik ranks and the broader socialist movement, with critics such as Rosa Luxemburg warning that Bolshevik military policies threatened the prospects of international socialism, leading to tensions between socialist pacifists and those who prioritized armed struggle as the only viable path to socialism (Luxemburg, 1918, p. 62).

From the outset of World War I, Lenin framed the conflict as an inevitable consequence of capitalist imperialism, condemning both capitalist governments and reformist socialists who sought peace through parliamentary means. In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), Lenin asserted that "the war is not an accident, nor the result of the folly of rulers, but the natural and inevitable outgrowth of monopoly capitalism. The proletariat must not seek peace under imperialist rule but must transform this war into a class war" (Lenin, 1917, p. 47). Unlike Jean Jaurès and other socialist pacifists, who had advocated worker-led strikes to prevent war, Lenin saw World War I as an opportunity for revolution, urging socialists to abandon reformist anti-militarism and embrace revolutionary struggle as the only viable means of achieving socialism.

Going further, the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917 forced them to confront the immediate question of how to end Russia's involvement in the war without jeopardizing the revolution. This dilemma led to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), which formally withdrew Russia from World War I but at the cost of ceding vast territories to Germany. Lenin justified the treaty as a temporary necessity, arguing that it would stabilize Soviet power, prevent counter-revolutionary forces from exploiting continued conflict, and allow the Bolsheviks to consolidate their rule. However, this decision sparked internal divisions within the Bolshevik leadership - revolutionary hardliners, including Nikolai Bukharin, opposed the treaty, believing it to be a betrayal of the revolutionary cause. They feared that by surrendering land to imperialist powers, the Bolsheviks were undermining the global socialist movement and contradicting Lenin's earlier calls for turning the imperialist war into a global proletarian uprising (Luxemburg, 1918, p. 54). This internal debate highlighted the tensions between socialist pacifism and revolutionary militarism, as the Bolsheviks found themselves negotiating peace with imperialist states while simultaneously advocating for worldwide class war.

Moreover, while Lenin's militarized approach to revolution was grounded in pragmatic concerns for survival, it alienated many left-wing socialists and pacifist Marxists, including Rosa Luxemburg. Though Luxemburg was a fierce critic of reformist pacifism, she also condemned the authoritarian military tactics of the Bolsheviks, warning that they could undermine the long-term prospects of international socialism. In her 1918 critique *The Russian Revolution*, Luxemburg cautioned against the dangers of centralized revolutionary violence, asserting that "Revolutionary violence must be a means to liberate the proletariat, not a tool for suppressing its democratic instincts. The dictatorship of the proletariat must not become a dictatorship over the proletariat" (Luxemburg, 1918, p. 62).

Luxemburg's opposition to Bolshevik militarization stemmed from two primary concerns. Firstly, she feared that Lenin's centralization of power and reliance on military force would lead to a bureaucratic dictatorship, ultimately undermining the democratic foundations of socialism. Secondly, she warned that Lenin's prioritization of securing Soviet power at all costs risked abandoning internationalism, alienating socialist movements in other countries and reducing socialism to a nationalized Soviet project. These debates exposed the deep divisions within socialist anti-militarism, with Leninist revolutionaries embracing military struggle as necessary while Luxemburgian socialists advocated for a more democratic, internationalist approach to socialist resistance.

As such, the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath profoundly reshaped socialist conceptions of war, peace, and revolution, forcing socialist movements worldwide to redefine their stance on militarism. Lenin's insistence that pacifism was a bourgeois illusion led to a permanent division between reformist and revolutionary socialist factions, shaping future debates on war and militarism in socialist thought. As the Bolshevik model gained influence among communist movements throughout the 20th century, the question of whether socialist revolutions should embrace or reject militarism remained a central ideological dilemma. This debate would re-emerge in later conflicts, particularly during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and postcolonial struggles against imperialism, where socialists continued to wrestle with the contradictions, challenges, and long-term consequences of revolutionary militarism versus socialist pacifism.

5. INTERWAR SOCIALIST PACIFISM AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS (1919–1936)

The interwar period (1919–1936) marked a period of profound re-evaluation for socialist anti-militarists. The devastation of World War I reinforced socialist commitments to preventing war, but deep ideological divisions emerged regarding the best means of achieving lasting peace. The formation of the League of Nations in 1919 sparked intense debates within socialist circles—while reformist socialists saw it as an opportunity for diplomatic conflict resolution, revolutionary socialists dismissed it as a bourgeois institution incapable of preventing future imperialist wars. Meanwhile, socialist parties across Europe struggled to reconcile their pacifist commitments with the rising threat of fascism, leading to tensions between advocates of peaceful disarmament and those who argued for militant resistance against authoritarianism.

The establishment of the League of Nations in 1919 was initially seen by many reformist socialists as a potential mechanism for war prevention, offering a legal and diplomatic alternative to militarized state policies. Socialist parties such as the British Labour Party, the French SFIO, and the German SPD supported the League, believing that it could advance socialist principles of collective security, economic justice, and internationalism (Carr, 1939, p. 189). Despite its weakened influence after World War I, the Second International officially endorsed the League, hoping that it would serve as a platform for working-class peace activism. Socialist leaders such as Ramsay MacDonald and Léon Blum argued that, by engaging with the League, socialists could push for arms control, diplomatic mediation, and economic cooperation as alternatives to war. Revolutionary socialists, however, particularly those aligned with the Comintern (established in 1919), rejected this strategy outright, viewing the League as a tool of imperialist capitalism

rather than a genuine force for peace. Rosa Luxemburg, before her assassination in 1919, had already warned against what she saw as the illusion of bourgeois peace, declaring that "the League of Nations is but the mask of imperialist interests, a diplomatic charade designed to obscure the economic and political foundations of war" (Luxemburg, 1919, p. 71). For Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the League was not a mechanism for peace but rather a means for capitalist states to maintain control over global economic systems while suppressing revolutionary movements. The Soviet Union, though initially excluded from the League, remained deeply critical of its effectiveness, viewing it as an instrument of Western hegemony rather than a genuine forum for international cooperation.

As such, by the early 1920s, socialist thought was deeply divided between reformist socialists, who sought to engage with the League of Nations to build a legal framework for lasting peace, and revolutionary socialists, who rejected the League as an extension of imperialist capitalism and instead advocated for workers' revolutions as the only true means of ending war. Despite these ideological fractures, socialist parties across Europe continued to campaign for disarmament as a concrete strategy to prevent another global war. Throughout the 1920s, socialist-led initiatives pressured governments to reduce military budgets, abolish conscription, and establish international agreements on arms control (Ceadel, 2009, p. 229). The German SPD led campaigns against rearmament, arguing that the Weimar Republic should serve as a model for global disarmament rather than re-enter militarization. In France, the SFIO introduced disarmament proposals within the League of Nations, calling for mutual arms reduction treaties among major European powers. The British Labour Party's 1928 Peace Policy similarly called for the gradual abolition of standing armies in favor of an international system of conflict mediation.

On the other hand, as fascist movements gained strength in Italy, Germany, and Spain, socialist anti-militarist strategies came under increasing scrutiny and internal criticism. The failure of League of Nations diplomacy to curb fascist aggression—most notably the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935) and the German reoccupation of the Rhineland (1936)—forced many socialists to reassess their stance on militarism (Liddington, 1989, p. 219). This realization deepened fractures within socialist movements, particularly in Spain and France, where debates over how to respond to fascism intensified. On one side, pacifist socialists continued to argue that military resistance would only escalate violence and that diplomatic negotiations remained the best path forward. On the other, anti-fascist socialists, including many from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the French Popular Front, increasingly supported armed defense against fascist takeovers, believing that failing to fight back would ensure totalitarian victory. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) ultimately crystallized this debate, as socialist pacifists struggled to justify non-violence while Franco's forces actively suppressed leftist movements. Many socialists who had previously advocated disarmament and diplomatic solutions now actively supported military resistance, marking a significant ideological shift away from absolute pacifism. Thus, by the late 1930s, it became clear that League of Nations diplomacy was insufficient to counter fascist expansion, forcing socialist parties across Europe to confront the limitations of their earlier pacifist commitments.

The interwar period therefore demonstrated both the strengths and weaknesses of socialist pacifism. While many socialists sought to institutionalize peace through diplomatic engagement, arms control, and international cooperation, their strategies often proved ineffective against the growing militarization of fascist regimes. By the late 1930s, the failure of the League to stop fascist aggression forced many socialists to reconsider their stance on war and resistance, leading to a fundamental re-evaluation of socialist anti-militarist principles. This ideological crisis set the stage for the emergence of socialist resistance movements during World War II, where the balance between pacifism, revolutionary violence, and anti-fascist militancy would be further tested.

6. THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE SOCIALIST PACIFIST DILEMMA (1936–1939)

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) represented one of the most profound crises for socialist pacifism, forcing leftist movements to confront the limitations of absolute nonviolence in the face of fascist militarism. For decades, socialists had advocated disarmament and peaceful conflict resolution, but Franco's fascist rebellion against the Spanish Republic challenged the viability of pacifism as a strategy against authoritarian aggression. The failure of League of Nations diplomacy to prevent war, combined with Franco's military alliances with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, led many socialists to abandon their traditional pacifist commitments in favor of armed resistance (Preston, 2006, p. 143). The mobilization of foreign socialist volunteers in the International Brigades, who viewed the Spanish Civil War as a defining struggle between fascism and democracy, further tested the ideological coherence of socialist pacifism, marking a significant turning point in leftist attitudes toward war and militarism (Lines, 2012, p. 78).

By 1936, socialist parties across Europe and North America were deeply divided over how to respond to the Spanish conflict. While many remained committed to anti-war principles, others argued that armed

intervention was the only way to prevent fascism from spreading across Europe. At the outset of the war, socialist pacifists within organizations like the British Labour Party, the French SFIO, and various trade union groups advocated non-intervention, believing that a diplomatic resolution was preferable to military escalation. However, this pacifist approach quickly proved ineffective, as Franco's forces, backed by Hitler's Luftwaffe and Mussolini's troops, launched a brutal military campaign against Republican forces. The Western democracies' refusal to intervene militarily, citing League of Nations principles and non-intervention treaties, further demonstrated the shortcomings of pacifist strategies (Preston, 2006, p. 143).

In addition, socialists who initially advocated nonviolence found themselves faced with a stark reality: absolute pacifism failed to deter fascist military aggression, as Franco's forces continued their violent repression of workers' organizations, trade unions, and socialist politicians. The League of Nations proved powerless to intervene, reinforcing fears that international peace mechanisms were ineffective against fascist expansion while the fascist-backed military campaigns made peaceful resistance nearly impossible, forcing socialists to reconsider whether war was sometimes a necessary tool for defending democracy. As Franco's victories mounted, the idea of nonviolent resistance lost credibility, and increasing numbers of socialists turned toward militant anti-fascism.

Arguably, the most direct challenge to socialist pacifism during the Spanish Civil War came from the formation of the International Brigades, in which socialists, communists, and anarchists from across the world volunteered to fight against Franco's forces. Unlike traditional socialist peace organizations, which had long opposed war as a means of resolving conflicts, the Brigades represented a decisive shift toward armed struggle as a necessary form of resistance (Lines, 2012, p. 78). By 1937, over 35,000 socialist and communist volunteers from more than 50 countries had joined the Republican forces, demonstrating that many within the socialist movement now viewed military resistance as unavoidable. Among those who fought were veteran pacifists who had once opposed war, but who now saw fascism as an existential threat requiring direct action.

The International Brigades' participation in battles such as Jarama (1937) and Ebro (1938) confirmed several fundamental shifts in socialist thought on war and militarism. Firstly, armed resistance had become a core part of leftist ideology, as even former pacifists recognized the necessity of military intervention (Preston, 2006, p. 143). Secondly, the failure of Western governments to oppose Franco diplomatically drove many socialists toward militant solutions, marking a departure from traditional anti-war commitments (Lines, 2012, p. 78). Lastly, the conflict radicalized socialist thought on war, leading to a more pragmatic approach to militarism within post-war socialist movements (Beevor, 2006, p. 321). However, the Brigades also exposed contradictions within socialist anti-militarism—while their involvement defended the ideals of the Republic, their alignment with Soviet-backed factions created tensions between democratic socialists and authoritarian communist forces (Graham, 2005, p. 217).

As such, the Spanish Civil War forced socialists to reconsider fundamental questions about the feasibility of absolute pacifism in the face of rising fascism, militarization, and state repression. The failure of nonviolent strategies to prevent Franco's victory reinforced the view that "Pacifism alone is insufficient when confronted by totalitarian aggression; defensive violence may be the only means of preserving democratic socialism" (Tickner, 1992, p. 84). This realization led to several key shifts in socialist thought on war and militarism. Firstly, the end of absolute pacifism in mainstream socialist movements—after Spain, few socialist parties continued to oppose all forms of military resistance, with most accepting that some conflicts required armed intervention to protect democratic institutions (Preston, 2006, p. 229). Secondly, a shift toward pragmatic anti-militarism—while many socialists remained critical of war as an imperialist tool, the Spanish Civil War demonstrated that military struggle could sometimes be a necessary means of defending socialism against authoritarianism (Ceadel, 2009, p. 233). Finally, the recognition of the failure of institutional pacifism—the League of Nations' inaction in Spain convinced many socialists that diplomatic resolutions alone could not prevent war, leading to a greater emphasis on direct action and organized resistance (Rupp, 1997, p. 112).

By 1939, the defeat of the Spanish Republic demonstrated the limits of nonviolent socialist strategies in an era dominated by militarized fascist regimes. The Spanish Civil War effectively ended the dominance of absolute pacifism within mainstream socialist thought, replacing it with a more pragmatic, anti-fascist form of socialist militarism. The lessons of Spain would carry into World War II, where socialist movements—once deeply divided over the issue of war—would unite in armed resistance against the Axis powers.

Thus, while socialist pacifism remained an important theoretical position, its role in practical political movements had been forever altered by the realities of the Spanish conflict. The war reshaped socialist discourse on militarism, proving that while peace remained the ultimate goal, military resistance was sometimes necessary to achieve it.

7. CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF SOCIALIST ANTI-MILITARISM

Overall, the history of socialist anti-militarism between 1848 and 1939 reflects both the strengths and contradictions of socialist approaches to war and peace. Over the course of nearly a century, socialist movements played a critical role in shaping anti-war discourse, emphasizing that militarism was not merely a geopolitical issue but a structural feature of capitalism, imperialism, and class domination. From the First and Second Internationals to interwar pacifism and the fight against fascism, socialist anti-militarism evolved in response to changing political realities, but it was often weakened by ideological divisions over pacifism, armed resistance, and the role of international institutions in preventing war.

Despite these challenges, socialist pacifism had a lasting influence on 20th-century peace movements, particularly in the development of organized anti-war resistance and working-class solidarity against militarism. The internationalist outlook of socialist pacifism, though severely tested by World War I, inspired postwar peace movements, such as nuclear disarmament campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s and anti-imperialist movements against U.S. military interventions (Rupp, 1997, p. 112). However, the practical limitations of socialist anti-militarism became increasingly evident during moments of crisis, particularly in the face of World War I, fascism, and the Spanish Civil War. Several key weaknesses plagued socialist pacifism throughout this period: nationalism and political pragmatism often undermined socialist internationalism—as seen in the 1914 collapse of the Second International, when many socialist parties, despite their commitments to international solidarity, ultimately supported their national war efforts (Luxemburg, 1915, p. 72). In addition, the lack of a unified strategy made it difficult for socialist movements to maintain a consistent anti-militarist stance, particularly when confronted with fascist aggression (Ceadel, 2009, p. 233). Finally, the failure of institutional pacifism—exemplified by socialist reliance on the League of Nations—became clear as the League lacked enforcement power and failed to prevent rearmament and expansionist wars in the 1930s. Ultimately, socialist anti-militarism was unable to prevent war on its own, as its institutional strategies were undermined by the realities of imperialism, fascism, and class compromise. However, it remained a powerful intellectual tradition that continued to influence postwar socialist critiques of militarism and imperialism.

However, the theoretical and practical legacy of socialist anti-militarism persisted beyond World War II, shaping leftist critiques of Cold War militarization and postcolonial struggles against imperialist wars. The Soviet Union's foreign policy, despite its militarized nature, continued to frame war as a tool of capitalist imperialism, a discourse later adopted by anti-colonial socialist movements in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Tickner, 1992, p. 98). More broadly, socialist critiques of war and militarism have remained relevant to contemporary debates on global conflict, imperialism, and security policy. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have expanded on socialist anti-militarist critiques, emphasizing the gendered and racialized dimensions of war and arguing that militarism perpetuates not only economic class oppression but also patriarchal and racial hierarchies (Shepherd, 2011, p. 76). In contemporary anti-war activism, socialist pacifist arguments continue to inform opposition to Western military interventions, particularly in the Middle East, as well as criticisms of the arms industry, which socialists argue profits from war and perpetuates global instability. Additionally, calls for disarmament and alternatives to military security policies remain central to socialist critiques, particularly in discussions on climate security and international diplomacy.

Although socialist anti-militarism was often hindered by ideological fragmentation and political pragmatism, it remains a foundational component of anti-war and anti-imperialist thought. The debates that shaped socialist responses to war between 1848 and 1939—the tensions between reform and revolution, between pacifism and militant resistance—continue to be relevant in 21st-century discussions on war, peace, and global security. By revisiting these historical struggles, modern socialist movements can draw lessons from past successes and failures, ensuring that anti-militarist critiques remain central to contemporary efforts for social justice and peacebuilding.

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