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War, Remembrance, and Propaganda

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This rivalry in armaments has brought the European governments to the necessity of establishing compulsory military service, which alone procures the greatest number of men with the least expenditure. Germany was the first to adopt conscription, and other nations followed suit. Thus all citizens have been called to arms to maintain the iniquities perpetrated upon themselves, so that the citizens of a State have become the supporters of their tyrants.

What is the motive power used by governments to induce peaceful nations to commit violence and murder? It is called patriotism. It is the art of proving that one group of population separated by a conditional imaginary line, called a frontier, is far superior and preferable in every way to another group of population which lives on the other side of this imaginary line. The most friendly relations, identity of religion, of language, of instruction, of common stock and most intimate friendship, do not prevent these two groups, at a given signal, from rushing at each other and cutting each other's throats, after the fashion of the most ferocious beasts. And the cause for this signal to kill is often a trifling misunderstanding on the part of the rulers of these two groups of people. These peaceful, good, friendly, labouring people throw themselves upon one another in such a case to destroy one another, invoking to their aid a God who, no doubt, must be a fierce Moloch, and both sides express the same blasphemies in the name of God and civilization.

Leo Tolstoy: The Workers and Patriotism

“The essence of all slavery consists in taking the product of another’s labor by force. It is immaterial whether this force be founded upon ownership of the slave or ownership of the money that he must get to live.”

To keep the majority of men in submission, the minority in power employs the military caste.

Every government needs the army, first of all to keep its own subjects in submission, and secondly, to safeguard the exploitation of their labour. But there is not only one government, there are many of them which all rule by violence and are ever ready to filch their neighbour’s wealth created by subjects already reduced to slavery. That is why every government needs an army not only to keep in power at home, but also to defend its booty against greedy neighbours. The States are forced to compete in increasing their arms. The example set is contagious, as Montesquieu noticed 150 years ago.

Every increase in the fighting force by one State directed against its subjects causes uneasiness to the neighbouring State and compels it to increase its army, too. If the armies today run into millions of men it is not only because of the fact that one State threatens another, it is also due above all to the desire to crush labour unrest at home. One is the result of the others: the despotism of the governments grows with their power and their successes abroad, and their aggressive disposition keeps pace with their despotism at home.

November 11 is a date commemorated by many people for many different reasons. In England and many of its former colonies, including Canada, November 11 is a national holiday to “honour” the countless soldiers who have died in the “service” of their countries. November 11 was chosen because that is the date in 1918 that the Armistice was signed in Europe putting an end to the First World War, an unnecessary mass slaughter of millions of people, civilians and soldiers. In the United States, November 11 is “Veterans’ Day.” With the October Revolution in Russia the previous fall taking Russia out of the conflict and instilling fears in the other European ruling classes that their turn would be next, with mutinies and revolts spreading in Germany, the powers that be decided it was time to put an end to the conflict, lest they be consumed by it like the millions of their lowly subjects and now the Czar of Russia.

For anarchists, November 11 is the anniversary of the judicial murder of the Haymarket Martyrs, five anarchist revolutionaries condemned for their radical ideas and actions, for having had the audacity and the impertinence to challenge the violent rule of the state and its minions, the police, the army and the courts, and to call for the workers to fight back and reclaim their freedom and dignity.

The Haymarket Martyrs

In Canada, England and New Zealand, red plastic poppies are distributed by veterans' groups every November to raise money and to commemorate the soldiers who died fighting other soldiers in other people's wars. To counter these state-sponsored attempts to maintain patriotic loyalty by venerating those forced to commit violence against others, various groups have for decades distributed white poppies as symbols of peace.

The Conservative government in Canada is now waging a propaganda campaign against the white poppy, denouncing anyone for wearing one for trying to "politicize" Remembrance Day, as if **Remembrance Day** is anything but political. The architect of this campaign is Julian Fantino, the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the former head of the Toronto police and the Ontario Provincial Police. When head of the OPP, Fantino took an aggressive approach to protests by First Nations people, and was responsible for overseeing security at the G8 summit in Huntsville, Ontario in 2010. The Conservative government is big on "law and order," bringing in more mandatory prison sentences, outlawing the wearing of masks at public demonstrations, and continuing the unsuccessful "war" against drugs. As with other right wing parties, the Conservatives are also waging a war against organized labour, banning strikes in various industries, imposing onerous reporting requirements to which corporations are not subject, and threatening to bring in "right to work" legislation.

In Volume One of *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas*, I included a short piece by the Russian novelist, pacifist and anti-authoritarian, Leo Tolstoy, against war and militarism,

"Compulsory Military Service" (Selection 75), taken from his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894). Here I present an alternate translation of part of that selection, published by Alexander Berkman in his paper, *The Blast*, in May 1916, during the ultimately successful "Preparedness" propaganda campaign to involve the United States in the war in Europe.