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## **Friedrich Engels on European disarmament**

In several of his late writings, Engels emphasizes the devastating consequences of war with modern technology between militarized states. One example is his preface to a book by the German socialist Sigismund Borkheim, published in 1888, in which he gives a gloomy and prophetic description of future war:

*Finally, the only war left for Prussia-Germany to wage will be a world war, a world war, moreover, of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined. Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other's throats and in the process they will strip Europe bareer than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent; famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism, both of the armies and the people, in the wake of acute misery; irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in universal bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their conventional political wisdom to the point where crowns will roll into the gutters by the dozen and no one will be around to pick them up; the absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will emerge as victor from the battle. Only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class. That is the prospect for the moment when the systematic development of mutual one-upmanship in armaments reaches its climax and finally brings forth its inevitable fruits (Marx & Engels Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 451).*

Although Engels here refers to "the possible victory of the working class", the description does not contain much optimism. The framework for eventual victory will be ruined societies and degraded populations. This is not the way Engels wants to build new socialist forms of society and community.

Such predictions about the nature and consequences of future war in Europe naturally raised the question if it was possible to avoid this development. Engels also grappled with this, most clearly in a series of articles published in the newspaper "Vorwärts" in March 1893, at the same time as the defense budget was discussed in the German Reichstag. The articles were immediately published as a pamphlet entitled "Can Europe disarm?" In the preface to the booklet, Engels writes:

*I proceed from the assumption that is increasingly gaining general acceptance: that the system of standing armies has been carried to such extremes throughout Europe that it must either bring economic ruin to the peoples on account of the military burden, or else degenerate into a general war of extermination, unless the standing armies are transformed in good time into a militia based on the universal arming of the people (Marx & Engels Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 371).*

At the time, the idea of disarmament was not widespread. Peace movements were emerging and were also being linked with the socialist working class movement, as shown for instance by the establishment in Britain of the "Workmen's Peace Association" in 1870. However, the main demand of the peace movements was the introduction of legally based arbitration as a way of

solving conflicts between nations without war. Another way of limiting warfare, which had been used by governments on a few occasions, was the prohibition of the use of especially dangerous weapons such as poisoned bullets. But disarmament, where governments in peacetime agree to reduce their military capacity in certain ways, was a relatively new idea. The first Hague conference, where governments negotiated both international peaceful arbitration and disarmament, only took place in 1899.

In the beginning of the pamphlet, Engels briefly describes the growth of armament in Europe. He points out that the larger states, especially Germany, France and Russia, seek to outdo each other in military power and military readiness. In this arms and power race, it may seem foolish to talk about disarmament; but the classes of the peoples who will primarily have to supply the soldiers and pay the taxes are everywhere calling for disarmament. Engels argues that it is possible to disarm, and thus to guarantee peace, and he even claims that it can be done relatively easily if Germany takes the initiative and shows the way.

After the war between Germany and France in 1870-71, compulsory military service in various forms has been adopted by all European countries. Engels sees this as a positive development; an army that mainly recruits soldiers among married middle-aged men is less offensive than an army with an emphasis on recruited professional soldiers. However, the situation is marked by the sharpened political tensions and the arms race between Germany and France, which gradually also involves Russia, Austria and Italy. As part of the race, the countries have begun to extend their military service and recruit more and more young recruits.

Engels emphasizes that the revolutionary nature of the German compulsory service system is the requirement that all armed men must be able to contribute to the country's defense throughout the phase of life where they are physically capable of it. That principle neither can nor should be questioned. But it is possible to lay down rules for the length of active service time. This is where Engels sees the possibility of disarmament:

*International regulation, by the great powers of the Continent, of the maximum term of active service with the colours of all arms of the service, initially for two years, as far as I am concerned – but with the proviso of an immediate further reduction as soon as people are convinced of the possibility, and with the militia system as the ultimate objective (Marx & Engels Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 374).*

From a present-day perspective, this proposal for disarmament may seem surprising. The international agreements on disarmament during the 20<sup>th</sup> century generally focused not on the length of military service or the number of soldiers, but on limiting the size, the destructive potential and the number of weapons. Important examples are the naval treaties of the 1920ies and 1930es, which limited the size and number of different types of warships, and the nuclear disarmament treaties following the cold war period. However, Engels focuses on the length of military service as a way of controlling the size of armies and limiting the military's independence as a social and political power.

Engels argues that the length of service is crucial to an army's combat capability. If an international upper limit on the length of service is successfully agreed, the relative ratio of the fighting power of the armies will be maintained at its current level.

If the length of service is not more than two years, the armies will be forced to use the time effectively. Military training will have to concentrate on the essentials and it will become evident how little time it actually takes to turn a well-developed young man into a soldier. As Engels also argued in other writings (for instance his 1865 pamphlet "The Prussian Military Question and the German Worker's Party"), the rules of military training are full of obsolescent provisions and ideas that discipline must be learned through meaningless activities. Just the abolition of the parade march would make several weeks available for rational training.

The duration of the period of service must be seen in the context of young people's education. Engels emphasizes that schools in Prussia are usually equipped with tools for physical training (bars, racks, etc.), and these tools should be used systematically so that the young people have gymnastics both freely and in formation, while muscles and bodies are still agile. He argues that it is foolish to first let the muscles and bones of young adults stiffen and then have to train them again in the military service. Furthermore, boys can well be trained in military movement patterns, in groups and formations, as part of schooling. Participating in field marches and exercises is not only good for young men's bodies, it also develops their intelligence and enable them to complete a military education relatively quickly. Engels' argument here is of course controversial. On one hand, physical activity as part of schooling is generally a good thing, and in the school context young people are less exposed to military ideology. On the other hand, training military formations in school may establish a platform for military ideology in the education system.

After presenting the military arguments for the requirement of a maximum of two years' service, Engels discusses the political possibilities of having this implemented through international agreements.

Russia is one of the great European powers involved in the arms and power race. The first impression will be that Russia - with a population of over 200 million - must be crucial for a European agreement on the length of service. However, Engels argues that for military as well as economic reasons Russia can be disregarded. He points out that that a military based on compulsory military service presupposes a certain economic and intellectual development. If these preconditions are lacking, the system does more harm than good - and that, according to Engels, is the situation in Russia. Russian soldiers are undoubtedly brave, but they are completely dependent on the close social and working communities that exist in the rural municipalities and in the smaller towns. This dependence on the community allows Russian soldiers to fight in closed formations of infantry, but not in situations that require individual assessment and initiative. And modern warfare, with increasingly effective firearms, requires organization into smaller and more flexible groups, where soldiers must continually assess options for action. Furthermore, Engels points out that Russia has too few officers because the officer group is recruited only from the nobility and the bourgeois families of the cities, and this constitutes a minimal part of the country's population.

In addition to Russia's military weakness, the economic and social situation in the country is depressing. The liberalization of agriculture and the subsequent development of capitalist large-scale industry have undermined Russia's stability. The nobility has made money selling wood from the forests, but is more and more indebted. The peasants have poorer land than before and are burdened by heavy taxes and not least by the fact that they are now obliged to pay taxes in cash rather than in kind. The ruthless de-forestation undertaken by the nobility has reduced the quality of the arable land, so that the harvest yield falls, the export of wheat stops and famine spreads. The economy of Russian agriculture is in deep crisis. And since the peasants make up almost nine-tenths of Russia's population, the country is also in crisis. The Russian state, including the military, depends heavily on foreign loans, and the country's creditworthiness is eroding.

According to Engels, Russia has neither the military nor the economic power that the size and population of the country could indicate. Therefore, the country's participation is not essential for a European agreement on military service.

Against this background, Engels discusses whether a proposal a maximum of two years' compulsory military service is likely to be accepted by the other powers on the European mainland. He assumes that Germany, as the strongest military power in Europe, has the basis for making the proposal. But what will be the reactions if Germany makes this proposal to Austria, Italy and France? Engels believes that both Austria and Italy will be positive. The Austrian army already has many proponents of shorter service, and Italy is under heavy economic pressure from high military budgets.

France will have a crucial position. Engels argues that the proposed limitations will not impair France's military position. Compulsory service on the Prussian model is a relatively new system in France and that will make it easier to reform the system. Also, the school system is currently being reformed, and this may strengthen the physical conditions of young people, and thus their military potential. If France signs and ratifies an agreement on the maximum duration of military service, it will come into force, even though revanchist currents towards Germany may lead to unrest and certain breaches of the agreement. Germany can afford to be generous because it is still far ahead of France in military strength.

It is also possible that the chauvinist sentiments may prevail and lead France to reject the proposal. Engels argues that even if that were to happen it would be a great advantage for Germany to have put forward the proposal. The initiative will break with the image of Germany as expansionist, militaristic and untrustworthy established through the many years' of Bismarck's regime. Germany will show a new side, emerge as a peacemaking nation. Germany will gain confidence among other countries, not least England; and England will play a crucial role in a future war, because the British navy can control the supply lines between France and Russia.

Against this background, Engels concludes that Germany must have the courage to propose a maximum of two years' compulsory military service, thus initiating disarmament in Europe.

As we now know, this is not what happened. But Engels' proposal and arguments, although unrealistic in some respects, are interesting and in many ways consistent.