**War and Revolution: Friedrich Engels as a Military and Political Thinker**

**Abstract**

This essay explores the link between political and military strategy and tactics in the work of Friedrich Engels. Though widely praised for his understanding of military affairs, Engels’s interlocutors have tended to be dismissive of his political works. By exploring his politics through the lens of his military writings this essay challenges the view that Engels was a mechanical materialist and political fatalist thinker. It argues that his military writings cannot be understood apart from his political works, and that, whatever the historical limitations of the specific conclusions to which he came, his method in these writings illuminate his profound grasp of the relationship between strategy and tactics at both the military and political levels.

**Key words:** War; Revolution; Marxism; Engels; Clausewitz; Strategy; Tactics

**Introduction**

Friedrich Engels’s reputation as a significant social and political theorist has not fared well over the last half century or so. He was the first causality in what became a much broader critique of Marxism over this period.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nonetheless, even those who have been very critical of other aspects of his thought tend to accept that his military writings continue to be highly regarded.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed the specialist literature includes some very high praise of this work. W.B. Gallie argues the Engels ‘turned himself into probably the most perceptive military critic of the nineteenth century’.[[3]](#footnote-3) While Sigmund Neumann and Mark von Hagen claim that what was once said of Clausewitz could easily be repeated of Engels: ‘He is a genius in criticism. His judgements are as clear and weighty as gold. He shows how greatness in strategic thought consists in simplicity’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Martin Berger waggishly comments that ‘in a history of the nineteenth century compiled by a truly single-minded military buff, Marx would figure only as Engels’s research assistant.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

The contrast between Engels’s reputation as a military thinker and the otherwise dismissive approach to this work is not least interesting because he believed that his military and political writings formed a whole. His primary goal in these works was to grasp how socialism might be won against international capitalism understood as a concrete totality fixed through ideological, legal and (competing) military powers. Martin Kitchen comments that Engels’s contribution to the field marks ‘a serious and often illuminating attempt by a dedicated socialist to grapple with a major problem which has yet to be answered’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Unfortunately, Engels’s interlocutors have seldom sought to interrogate analyses of his writings on war with his discussions of revolution more generally. Indeed, while Engels continues to command space in textbook histories of military strategy,[[7]](#footnote-7) Gallie’s complaint that the implications of his military writings have not adequately been integrated into a Marxist theory of revolution is as true today as it was when he first made this point in the 1970s.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Martin Berger penned the most detailed attempt to remedy this gap in the literature. Regrettably, his study somewhat misses its target. Berger argues that the tendency amongst twentieth-century Marxists to disregard the military dimension of Marx’s and Engels’s work can be explained by the fact that ‘the solutions [they] devised lacked continuity, intellectual symmetry, and success’.[[9]](#footnote-9) I think it is more plausible to suppose that the primary reason why subsequent Marxists have tended to be reluctant to engage with this aspect of their *oeuvre* is because they believed that with the rise of what Bukharin, Hilferding, Lenin and Luxemburg called imperialism at the turn of the last century there had been a radical transformation of the European and world theatres after Marx’s and Engels’s deaths. Consequently, twentieth-century Marxists came to view the geopolitical conflicts about which Engels and Marx had written to be of purely historical interest. If this changed context is the most plausible explanation for the relative dearth of secondary Marxist commentary on Engels’s military writings, an important secondary reason is surely the embarrassment felt by many Marxists about his and Marx’s seeming support for German militarism and especially their deployment of the language of ‘non-historic nations’ to describe those peoples with whom the Germans (and other ‘historic’ nations) came into conflict in the nineteenth-century.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Though understandable, the tendency to skirt over Engels’s military writings lends itself to a one-sided account of Marxist political theory. For Engels, revolutionary politics, far from being a simple clash of social classes, operated at a plurality of levels, including the military.[[11]](#footnote-11) And the defeats of the revolutionary-military struggles of 1848-9 informed his and Marx’s strong conviction that the future success of the workers’ movement demanded socialists develop a workable strategy for confronting and overcoming the military power of states. Seen in this light, Engels’s military writings form an integral part of Marxist political strategy more broadly conceived.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Engels’s keen awareness of the international dimension of the social revolution meant that he was the first thinker to provide what Kitchen calls an ‘astonishingly acute’ prediction of the general contours of the First World War.[[13]](#footnote-13) This prediction was all the more remarkable as it was made against the background of the much shorter European conflicts of his own day. His mature conception of socialist politics was framed as a necessary bulwark against the drift to this oncoming barbarism. And though Engels ultimately failed to provide an adequate answer to the question of what the left should do about the oncoming war, his discussion of this problem remains a rich source of insight on the organic relationship between geopolitics, class struggle and nationalism.

The theoretical architecture of Engels’s approach to politics can usefully be understood in relation to Clausewitz’s claim that ‘tactics teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war’:

The strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accord with its purpose … he will, in fact, shape the individual campaigns and, within these, decide on the individual engagements … The strategist, in short, must maintain control throughout.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Engels, who believed Clausewitz to be a ‘star of the first magnitude’,[[15]](#footnote-15) conceived revolutionary politics in similar terms. And though neither he nor Marx developed an adequate understanding of the role of a revolutionary party in tying strategy and tactics together,[[16]](#footnote-16) he did point to the clear strategic failing of the incipient reformist tendencies within European socialism. He argued that political ‘opportunism’ was characterised by a willingness to lose sight of the final strategic goal of socialism while struggling for immediate victories in individual engagements:

The forgetting of the great, the principal considerations for the momentary interests of the day, this struggling and striving for the success of the moment regardless of later consequences, this sacrifice of the future of the movement for its present, may be ‘honestly’ meant, but it is and remains opportunism, and ‘honest’ opportunism is perhaps the most dangerous of all![[17]](#footnote-17)

Engels’s approach to politics is best understood in opposition to this ‘opportunistic’ method: from the 1840s until his death in 1895 he aimed to frame his socialist response to military and political developments tactically in relation to the broader strategy of socialist revolution.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**1848: War, Revolution and the National Question**

In 1848, Marx and Engels believed that the ‘bourgeois revolution’ required to overcome feudal fetters to capitalist development in Germany was intertwined with the national question. Because a unified German state would challenge interests in the various surrounding states and nations, the demand for German unity impelled them to incorporate national and military questions within their theory of revolution. If the national tensions that Engels addressed were most obvious in Austria’s multi-ethnic empire, they were also much in evidence elsewhere: including the borders with France, Italy and Denmark, and most especially in Poland, which had been divided between Prussia, Austria and Russia since 1772. One consequence of this messy situation was that revolution in 1848 meant for Germany what it had meant for France half a century earlier: war. The social revolution of 1848 took the form of a military conflict against the forces of counter-revolution - backed ultimately by Russia.

The democratic core of Engels’s approach to the national question was signalled in a speech he gave at a meeting in London in November 1847. Commenting on the ‘disgrace’ of Germany’s control over part of Poland, he famously announced that ‘A nation cannot become free and at the same time continue to oppress other nations’. Further, he insisted, support for Polish national liberation was in the interests of ‘German democrats’. Indeed, the liberation of Germany was impossible ‘without the liberation of Poland from German oppression’.[[19]](#footnote-19) He viewed Germany’s relationship with Poland as essentially one piece of a larger jigsaw of the European state system. This system, forged at the Congress of Vienna, aimed to subordinate ‘dynastic conflicts and national interests to the common need to defend … privileges against the republicanism and egalitarian demons wakened by the French Revolution’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The ‘Holy Alliance’ between Russia, Prussia and Austria aimed to extend the reactionary project embedded in the Congress of Vienna by formalising the mutual exploitation and oppression of Poland by these three states. Consequently, ‘the partition of Poland’ was not merely the material link that cemented the ‘Holy Alliance’, it also embedded reactionary and counter-revolutionary policies across Germany by making her ‘dependent on Russia’.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This relationship meant that the victory for democracy could only be realised by breaking Prussia’s and Austria’s relationships with Russia. Thus, for Engels, support for the right of Polish independence was no abstract moral ideal. Rather, it flowed directly from the needs of the German revolution itself: ‘The creation of a democratic Poland is a primary condition for the creation of a democratic Germany’.[[22]](#footnote-22) This perspective had terrible implications. Because Polish and German freedom could only be won at the expense of the Russian Empire, the struggle for freedom in Germany would necessarily take the form of a war against Russia. War was the necessary means through which Germany might realise ‘a complete, open and effective break with the whole of our disgraceful past ... real liberation and unification ... and the establishment of democracy’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Given his not unrealistic assumption about Russian foreign policy in 1848, this democratic and internationalist perspective is difficult to dispute. Neither, unfortunately, is the rider that Engels added to the essay:

The struggle for independence of the diverse nationalities jumbled together south of the Carpathians is much more complicated and will lead to far more bloodshed, confusion and civil wars than the Polish struggle for independence.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Engels addressed the problem of these states through his exploration of the tensions between Slavs, Magyars and Germans within the Austrian Empire. If his analysis of the position of Poland within his broader revolutionary perspective is obviously democratic, his writings on the Southern Slavs have proved to be much more controversial.

Initially at least, his analysis of Austria’s relationship with the (non-Polish) Slav nations in her empire was very similar to the relation between Austria and Prussia on the one side and Poland on the other. He argued that:

[t]he fall of Austria has a special significance for us Germans. It is Austria which is responsible for our reputation of being the oppressors of foreign nations, the hirelings of reaction in all countries. Under the Austrian flag Germans have held Poland, Bohemia, Italy in bondage ... We have every reason to hope that it will be Germans who will overthrow Austria and clear away the obstacles in the way of freedom for the Slavs and Italians.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Engels’s analysis of these conflicts followed from the logic of his examination of the Polish Question. If the aim of the revolution was a unified, democratic Germany, the main impediment to this goal was essentially the same in Austria as it was in Prussia. The reactionary nature of both regimes was reproduced through their relationship with Russia which had a strategic interest in their survival and so, at the end of the day, propped up their despotic rulers. Revolution was therefore likely to take the form of war either with Russia or with one or other of its proxies. This prognosis was proved correct in 1848-49 when an initially successful Magyar revolt against Austrian rule was defeated through the intervention of Russian arms. Thus was reactionary Austria saved, and the German revolution ended. Addressing this military defeat was consequently of prime importance to émigré revolutionaries after 1848. If Engels’s analysis of these conflicts has been clouded by his use of the Hegelian concept of ‘non-historic peoples’,[[26]](#footnote-26) he and Marx were undoubtedly right to frame the revolutions of 1848 within a broader socio-political context, asking how, in the future, revolutionaries might overcome the military forces set against them.

**After 1848: Coming to terms with Defeat**

In *Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* Engels wrote that events in Paris in 1848 confirmed that ‘the invincibility of a popular insurrection in a large town had been proved to be a delusion … The army again was the decisive power in the State’.[[27]](#footnote-27) For revolutionaries, this situation demanded serious investigation, and from the early 1850s Engels addressed this problem through a systematic engagement with military theory and history.[[28]](#footnote-28)

If the Magyar struggles against Austria during the 1848 revolutions originally pushed Engels to seriously engage with the literature on the relationship between war and revolution,[[29]](#footnote-29) his research into military matters soon put him in a position where what he wrote was read at the highest level. Writing on the Crimean War he evidenced a keen awareness not merely of the detail of the military affairs and their geopolitical context, but also of the relationship between geopolitical conflicts and the class struggle. While assessing the war in relation to Europe’s five powers he insisted on the existence of a sixth power which had the potential to overcome the others:

That power is the Revolution. Long silent and retired … Manifold are the symptoms of its returning life …. A signal only is wanted ... This signal the impending European war will give, and then all calculations as to the balance of power will be upset by the addition of a new element.[[30]](#footnote-30)

If Engels believed that the class struggle could upset even the best laid military plans, he also insisted on the importance of the political and moral dimension within war. Though Wellington had died prior to the outbreak of the Crimean War, Engels laid blame for the British Army’s incompetence squarely at his feet. Having had command for the previous four decades his ‘narrow minded … mediocrity’ explained the utter unpreparedness of the British forces for the war.[[31]](#footnote-31) Engels’s keen eye for the importance of leadership was similarly evidenced in his letters on the American Civil War. Against claims that he embraced a mechanically materialistic and politically fatalistic conception of history, these letters evidence that he was much more alert than Marx (perhaps too alert) to the importance of the political dimension of history. Whereas Marx believed that the North’s victory in the Civil War was pretty-much assured by its greater economic strength, Engels initially insisted that the superior leadership and greater determination shown by the Southern forces in the early period of the war might well lead to their eventual triumph.[[32]](#footnote-32) It was only in the wake of, first, the Emancipation Proclamation and, second, the increased prominence given to General Grant in the Union army, that he allowed himself to become more optimistic about a Northern Victory.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Perhaps more interesting than these letters are his published comments on the socio-political limitations of the contending forces in the Franco-Prussian War. Engels argued that the limitations of the French forces could best be understood not in terms of the level of development of the French economy but rather against the backdrop of the politics of the Second Empire. After declaring war, the French failed to act decisively. Inexplicable in military terms, especially as the conflict had been long expected and prepared for, Engels suggested that the delay was rooted in the nature of French politics.[[34]](#footnote-34) Interestingly, Engels claims that at the time of the Italian War in 1859 the French had proved themselves the preeminent military force in Europe. However, over the ensuing decade corruption at the top of French society was reproduced within the army which had become increasingly ‘rotten’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Moreover, beyond the corrupt political system the French military was also undermined by the severity of domestic class relations. Indeed, General Trochu’s poor leadership in 1870 prefigured the debacle of 1940: his conservatism made him more afraid of the Parisian workers than of Prussian victory.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Conversely, though the Prussians were much better organised and led than the French, their forces too suffered from class-based limitations. If the strengths of the Prussian military system stemmed from its desire to train the whole male population for military service in an ongoing process that would maintain a relatively small regular force with massive reserves, this aim was severely undermined by the nature of Prussian absolutism. To maintain class rule at home a much larger regular force was needed while fewer than the full potential of young men were brought into the Landwehr. The resulting military structure was a compromise which though weaker than the country’s potential was nonetheless stronger than its French counterpart.[[37]](#footnote-37)

# Not that Engels held to the reductive claim that a comparative sociological analysis of the material balance of forces could predict success or failure in advance of military engagement. Rather, he insisted that the efficacy of particular tactics could only be judged on the basis of ‘practical experience’, and in any event the morale of the contending forces could be decisive.[[38]](#footnote-38)

# If these arguments illuminate the profound problems associated with attempts to reduce Engels’s Marxism to a variant of mechanical materialism and political fatalism,[[39]](#footnote-39) they also highlight how important his understanding of military power was to his and Marx’s theory of revolution. As Neumann and von Hagen write, Marx and Engels:

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# raised the question of social change in their time beyond the insurrectionary stage of the isolated *Putsch* to the plane of world politics. War and Revolution … were at that early period seen in their fundamental and continuous interrelationship by these still obscure theorists of world revolution.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Confronting the Prospect of War**

Amongst the most important of Engels’s military writings is his *Po and Rhine*. Occasioned by the threat of war between Austria and France over Austria’s Italian possessions in 1859, Engels’s work was peculiar in that it was aimed neither at a workers nor a socialist audience. Marx agreed that the pamphlet ‘must first appear *anonymously* so that the public believes the author to be an eminent general. In the *second* edition …you will reveal your identity … and then it will be a triumph for our party’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Visiting Germany two years later, Marx reported to Engels that his pamphlet had been read in the highest military circles both in Berlin and Vienna where it was widely assumed to have been the work of a Prussian General.[[42]](#footnote-42) The positive reception of this pamphlet was doubly important because though framed as a neutral work of military ‘science’, Engels’s conclusions supported the internationalist critique of contemporary German (and French) foreign policy – and as it happens it also predicted the Schlieffen plan of 1914 while von Schlieffen was himself still a teenager.[[43]](#footnote-43)

At its core, Engels’s pamphlet operated as a critique of the assumption common across German military circles that the Rhine should be defended on the Po; that is greater Germany’s (including Austria’s) western flank on the River Rhine should be defended across its ‘natural’ southern flank on the River Po in northern Italy. Challenging this argument in its own terms, Engels argued both that it made no sense, and that if generalised it implied France had an equally ‘natural’ right to all the lands west of the Rhine. So, far from guaranteeing German security, this argument served to justify French aggression.

Moreover, it did so by reproducing the oppression of Italy by Austria and thus Italian hatred of Germans. Engels claimed that this approach made no sense from a military point of view because, whereas a free Italy could become an ally against France for whom an independent Italy was anathema, Italy oppressed by Austria would become an ally of France. Consequently, defending the Rhine on the Po played into the hands of France without gaining any significant military advantage. The one thing that could help safeguard German interests was national unity – both for Germans and Italians. However, Prussia was against the former because it desired a lesser Germany without Austria so as to guarantee its own hegemony within the new state while Austria was against the latter for equally parochial dynastic reasons in Italy.

Ferdinand Lassalle, leader of one of the first German workers’ parties in the 1860s, asserted that Marx and Engels’s critique of Prussia meant they objectively supported Austria because this was the only German alternative to Prussian hegemony in Germany.[[44]](#footnote-44) This argument reveals more about Lassalle’s politics than it does about Marx and Engels. By contrast with Lassalle, they aimed to articulate a perspective that was politically independent from both Prussia and Austria. Engels was a stern critic of French aggression, and though he and Marx did believe that Bonaparte was a warmonger, they were equally critical of Austria’s oppression of Italy and of Prussia’s desire to create a lesser Germany as its own ‘barracks’.

When war broke out between France and Austria, Austrian policy did push the Italians into the arms of France, and the French, after defeating the Hapsburg state in a scrappy conflict, betrayed their Italian allies by annexing Savoy and Nice. In his subsequent *Savoy, Nice and the Rhine*, Engels argued that beneath the largely unfounded rhetoric about the essential Frenchness of these regions lay an offensive military strategy that pressed French hegemony against both Italy and Switzerland. Moreover, the French policy of occupying land up to its so-called ‘natural’ borders had as its logical conclusion a challenge to Germany on the Rhine. Commenting on Russian support for France during the conflict, he argued that the war risked reproducing the kind of fragmented Germany (and Italy) that had been enshrined in the Treaty of Vienna. The struggle for a unified German republic therefore implied standing up to French (and Russian) aggression towards Germany, Italy and Switzerland; Austrian oppression of Italy; and Prussia’s cynical opposition to Austria.[[45]](#footnote-45)

It was a complex terrain which Engels navigated admirably. This perspective also set him up as a critic of the forthcoming unification of lesser Germany under Prussian hegemony. If Prussia’s tacit support for France against Austria in 1859 was the first step in this process, the next step was Bismarck’s decision to go to war with Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein. A quick victory for Prussia and Austria produced an unstable situation in which Prussia controlled Schleswig while Austria controlled Holstein. Quickly thereafter, Bismarck used a dispute over the position of Holstein as a pretext for war with Austria in 1866 – which Prussia won, creating the basis for a unified lesser Germany under Prussian domination.

Engels’s response to these developments included engagements with the military, theoretical and political aspects of the situation. His analysis opened with the publication of a powerful strategic document, *The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers Party* (1865) and including an unfinished theoretical appraisal of Bismarck’s Blood and Iron Policy: *The Role of Force in History* (1887-8). These works were intended to frame an independent socialist perspective on war, an analysis of the social content of the newly unified Germany, and the prospects of a future European (world) war. They also illuminate a moment of transition in Engels’s (and Marx’s) thinking about war. Specifically, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 marked a turning point in their appraisal of the threat of war in Europe. Whereas they had previously framed their analyses of the relationship between war and revolution against the backdrop of the *Levée en masse* in France in 1793 when war and revolution were two sides of the same coin, after 1870 they came to the conclusion that war had to be avoided at all costs because it was a terrible impending catastrophe, and rather than complementing revolution, war had become a dire threat to the left.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Engels opened *The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers Party* with the claim that whereas up to that point the debate on military matters in Germany had been conducted between conservative feudal and liberal bourgeois elements, with the emergence of an independent working-class perspective military matters could be assessed in a scientific manner.[[47]](#footnote-47) He then surveyed the state of the Prussian military followed by an analysis of social relations in Prussia. He argued that the experience of 1848 had shown that the Prussian bourgeoisie’s fear of the workers’ movement had led it to become tied to the feudal aristocracy.[[48]](#footnote-48) However, this was a dynamic relationship. Prussian military restructuring was evolving in opposition to the needs of the German bourgeoisie because it was increasingly expensive while threatening the possibility of a coup. Would the bourgeoisie seriously resist these developments? Engels thought the bourgeoisie would bear these costs because they would fear that a workers’ government would be worse.

What should the attitude of the workers’ party be to the military question and the divisions between the government and the bourgeoisie? In the first instance, Engels supported universal conscription because, *mutatis mutandis* classical Athens, by placing arms in the hands of the workers it created the potential social basis for real workers’ democracy.[[49]](#footnote-49) Additionally, he argued that whereas in fully developed capitalist countries (England) the workers confronted the bourgeoisie in a fairly straightforward opposition, in Germany with its feudal overhang, the situation was more socially and thus more politically complex. One potential problem arising from this situation was the risk that workers would one-sidedly focus on their immediate conflicts with the bourgeoisie while leaving to one side the broader conflict with the reactionary relics of feudalism. Engels claimed that this would be a mistake. Capitalist development created the space in which the proletariat was emerging as an independent political force. Consequently, the workers’ movement should push the liberal petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie from a position of political independence. To do this was important because liberal democratic forms could be used by the workers for their own ends: ‘With freedom of the press and the right of assembly and association it will win universal suffrage, and with universal, direct suffrage, in conjunction with the above tools of agitation, it will win everything else’.[[50]](#footnote-50)

If these lines suggest that Engels had uncritically embraced parliamentary politics, in *The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers Party* he added an important rider to this argument. After suggesting that the workers and bourgeoisie ‘can only exercise real, organised, political power through parliamentary representation’, he pointed out that this was dependent on parliament having access to the ‘purse strings’. However, this is precisely what Bismarck aimed to avoid. Should socialists pour all their hopes into such an institution? Engels replied, ‘Surely not’. Moreover, he suspected that if Bismarck did decree ‘universal direct suffrage’ he, like Bonaparte before him, would so mediate this democracy as to make it essentially worthless.[[51]](#footnote-51)

By contrast with Lassalle’s supporters in the workers’ movement, Engels warned against Bismarck’s intention of using this particular form of suffrage as Bonaparte had used it before him; not as a means to democracy but rather to bolster his personal power on the one hand and the power of the Prussian Junkers on the other. In a context were the mass of peasants and agricultural workers had not yet been swept up into the independent workers’ movement ‘universal direct suffrage will not be a weapon for the proletariat but a *snare*’.[[52]](#footnote-52) So, despite believing that universal direct suffrage could be the means of emancipation, Engels argued that it could equally be used to entrap the proletariat within the parameters of reactionary politics. The utility of universal suffrage thus depended upon the specific circumstances in which it was introduced: he believed it could help foster the struggle for freedom in the context of a rising workers’ movement and universal conscription.[[53]](#footnote-53)

As to the orientation of the German workers’ movement, Engels suggested that the priority should be to ‘preserve the organisation of the workers’ party as far as present conditions permit’. Beyond that, he argued for driving ‘the Party of Progress on to make *real* progress, as far as possible’ and to ‘let the military question itself go the way that it will, in the knowledge that the workers’ party will one day also carry out its own, German‘army-reorganisation’.[[54]](#footnote-54) This final point illuminates his and Marx’s subsequent stance on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. In a statement written for the First International within days of the outbreak of the war, Marx claimed that, for Germany, the war was defensive in nature.[[55]](#footnote-55) In a sense this was a truism given what was known at the time – though historians now believe that Bismarck entrapped Bonaparte into declaring war so that he could play the victim and pull the southern German states into the conflict and thus into what became the German Empire. Nonetheless, despite insisting that this was a defensive war for the Germans, Marx did not give *political* support to the Prussian ruling class. The *Address on the Franco Prussian War* included statements from members of the International both in Germany and France condemning wars, especially ‘dynastic wars’.[[56]](#footnote-56) That the statement of the Germans included the phrase ‘with deep sorrow and grief we are forced to undergo a defensive war as an unavoidable evil’ has led many to conclude that Marx and Engels supported the Germans against the French (at least to begin with). Hal Draper claims that this is not the case. Marx supported Liebknecht’s and Bebel’s decision to abstain in the vote for war credits in the North German Confederation Reichstag and wrote that members of the International should campaign against the war both in France and Germany.[[57]](#footnote-57)

In a letter to Marx Engels did once suggest that Liebknecht had been wrong to abstain in the vote. This was because he believed that Liebknecht, by dismissing the war as merely a dynastic form, failed to grasp that it included a progressive dimension. German victory would, in however bastardised from, lead to the (at least partial) unification of Germany and thus to the creation of a space within which the German proletariat might emerge as an independent political force.[[58]](#footnote-58) Engels subsequently changed his position on this matter after an exchange with Marx;[[59]](#footnote-59) and Marx argued that, if Prussia were to annexe Alsace and Lorraine ‘it is the most certain way to convert this war into a *European institution*’. This act would open a ‘new world-historical epoch’ in which the peace would be converted ‘into a mere armistice, until France is sufficiently recovered to demand the lost territory back’ and until Russia also finds itself ‘inevitably’ at war with Germany.[[60]](#footnote-60)

This new context meant that war between the main European powers, far from being a necessary counterpart to revolution had instead become its mortal enemy. To view wars and revolution through the lens of the events of 1793 was no longer adequate or even relevant. Indeed, *The Communist Manifesto’s* demand for a bourgeois revolution in Germany had been realised by the most unlikely force: the Prussian Junkers led by Bismarck. Engels outlined how this had happened in his unfinished essay, *The Role of Force in History* (1887-8). Here, he suggested that though the German bourgeoisie had shown themselves to be too cowardly to realise the demands of their bourgeois revolution, in the context of heightened international competition Bismarck had unified Germany. And though he had carried out this task for the Junkers, his role was underpinned by the needs of the bourgeoisie. Bismarck had had realised the tasks of the bourgeois revolution behind the backs of the bourgeoisie.[[61]](#footnote-61)

However, once this demand had been realised, the negative consequences of Bismarck’s class background came to the fore. With the defeat of the French in 1870, Bismarck moved not to stabilise Europe but to ‘extort’ reparations. At this point he ‘appeared for the first time as an independent politician, who was no longer implementing in his own way a programme dictated from outside, but translating into action the products of his own brain, thereby committing his first enormous blunder.’[[62]](#footnote-62) The rash decision was not so much to demand the French pay the Germans monetary compensation; rather it consisted in Bismarck’s seizure of Alsace and Lorraine which had the effect of pushing France into the arms of Russia ensuring that, at some point, Europe would once again be plunged into war.[[63]](#footnote-63)

All of this happened in a context of deepening industrialisation that had as a corollary a constant revolutionising of the means of destruction. Engels noted that though these technologies made modern armies ever more efficient killing machines, in the short-term they also mediated against war because, or so he argued in *The Foreign Policy of Russian Tsardom* (1889-90), they made each new type of armaments obsolete almost as soon they were deployed.[[64]](#footnote-64) Unfortunately, this was a highly unstable situation and Alsace-Lorraine acted as a fault-line across Europe that made war increasingly inevitable while new technologies meant that the coming war would make previous conflicts seem like child’s play. Indeed, he insisted that Bismarck had created the conditions not merely for a European war but for a world war. This, as Engels famously and presciently predicted in 1887, was a terrifying prospect:

And, 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 barer 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.[[65]](#footnote-65)

It was against this backdrop that Engels spent the last decades of his life trying to formulate a revolutionary strategy that might save humanity from this impending barbarism. Martin Berger argues that, whereas Engels had previously proselytised for a war against Russia as a stimulus to revolution, in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war he ‘consistently deplored and feared’ it and hoped for ‘revolution as a means of avoiding war’.[[66]](#footnote-66) This new context, combined with his long-standing doubts about the *military* utility of barricade fighting,[[67]](#footnote-67) informed a profound *private* pessimism about the prospects for war that is evident in his letters to several of his closes comrades. In 1889 he wrote that prospects of a European war:

fills me with horror. Especially when I think of our movement in Germany, which would be overwhelmed, crushed, brutally stamped out of existence, whereas peace would almost certainly bring us victory.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Commenting on this letter, Gilbert Achcar writes that Engels developed a twofold strategy to counter this situation. On the one hand, he did whatever he could to foster the Peace Party within the various national states.[[69]](#footnote-69) On the other hand, he began to think through an altogether more radical approach to overcoming the army. In his 1895 introduction to Marx’s *Class Struggle in France*, he reiterated his claim that barricades had only ever been of use as a moral rather than as a military counter to the army.[[70]](#footnote-70) How then to overcome the resistance of the army to revolution? Engels’s answer was a strategy aimed at transforming the ‘bourgeois army from within’.[[71]](#footnote-71) In *Anti-Dühring* he wrote:

militarism … bears within itself the seed of its own destruction. Competition among the individual states forces them, on the one hand, to spend more money each year on the army and navy, artillery, etc., thus more and more hastening their financial collapse; and, on the other hand, to resort to universal compulsory military service more and more extensively, thus in the long run making the whole people familiar with the use of arms, and therefore enabling them at a given moment to make their will prevail against the warlords in command. And this moment will arrive as soon as the mass of the people—town and country workers and peasants—*will have* a will. At this point the armies of the princes become transformed into armies of the people; the machine refuses to work and militarism collapses by the dialectics of its own evolution.[[72]](#footnote-72)

This argument illuminates why Engels attached so much weight to the idea of universal conscription. Though undertaken for reactionary ends, he believed that by arming the (newly enfranchised) proletariat conscription could undermine militarism from within – an armed electorate could potentially impose its own will rather than act as mere servants of the will of others. This was clearly a revolutionary strategy – though one that was alert to the profound changes in the terrain of struggle over a century punctuated by the events of 1793, 1848 and 1870.

The pro-War left of 1914 insisted that they were merely repeating Engels’s call, articulated in *Socialism in Germany* (1991), for the defence of Germany in the event of a war with France and Russia.[[73]](#footnote-73) Engels argued that despite being a bourgeois republic, France through its alliance with Russia was acting as a tool of absolutist reaction. Against this force, German socialists would have to defend the gains they and their predecessors had won over the previous century ‘and they cannot accomplish that except by fighting Russia and its allies, whoever they may be, to the bitter end.’[[74]](#footnote-74)

This argument seems to signal a clear reversion back to the politics of 1848 (though certainly not a justification for Germany’s offensive strategy in 1914). But why revert to this position? Draper suggests that beneath its superficial call to arms, *Socialism in Germany* was actually first published in French as an attempt to subvert the pro-war arguments amongst the republican left. To this end, Engels pointedly argued both that Germany’s occupation of Alsace-Lorraine was oppressive and wrong and that the French Republic was politically progressive compared with the German Empire. Nevertheless, he insisted that an alliance with Russia would mean the ‘repudiation of France’s revolutionary mission’.[[75]](#footnote-75) If both Achcar and Draper are right to argue that Engels’s main concern was to avoid war by warning French socialists against justifying an alliance with Russia because of Alsace-Lorraine, they both fail to address the significance of Engels’s embrace of revolutionary defencism. Achcar is right that Engels wrote in a very specific context and Draper is equally right that he was uneasy about articulating this position.[[76]](#footnote-76) But though he was uneasy about expressing his opinion to the French, he was absolutely serious about the analogy with 1793. In a letter to Adolph Sorge, he wrote:

Bebel and I have been corresponding about this and are of the opinion that if the Russians start a war against us, German socialists should lash out *à outrance* at the Russians and their allies, whoever they may be. If Germany is crushed, so shall we be, while at best the struggle will be so intense that only revolutionary means will enable Germany to hold its own, and hence there is every likelihood that we may be forced to take the helm and play at 1793.[[77]](#footnote-77)

This argument is highly problematic at a number of levels. On the one hand, there are profound limitations with the idea of *Attaque à outrance* – the claim that in the context of the new overwhelming superiority of defensive technologies of warfare in the late nineteenth-century victory would go to the side with the greatest courage and élan. It is not merely that this idea was to be decisively falsified in 1914, more to the point Engels had argued as early as 1852 that a repetition of the success of the enthusiasm of the *Levée en masse* would be nigh on impossible in modern conditions.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Elsewhere, Engels did suggest a way out of this impasse. The growth in support for German Social Democracy, especially in ‘the rural districts of the six eastern provinces of Prussia’ would mean that ‘the German army is ours’.[[79]](#footnote-79) If this argument suggested a hope for the transformation of the army from within to give a new form to the *Levée en masse*, this was at best speculative in 1891. More to the point, his analysis was certainly innocent of any medium akin either to the moral aspect of barricade fighting or to the destruction of cadre armies coupled with the death of the officer corps that occurred in Russia prior to 1917 by which the army’s discipline might be broken politically.

**Conclusion**

Whatever the tactical limitations of the position Engels articulated in 1891, it did not entail political support for the German government. It was a form of *revolutionary* defencism predicated upon a creative and undogmatic revolutionary strategy to overcome the army from within. 1848 had taught him that when workers confront the army across the barricades the army tends to win. His response to this impossible situation was threefold: first, help make the movement as big as possible to make it as difficult as possible for the military to control; second, aim to undermine the army from within by winning the mass of soldiers to social democracy; and third, counter the kind of radical verbiage exemplified by Domela Nieuwenhuis’ call for a general strike at the outbreak of war with practical proposals adequate to the tasks at hand.[[80]](#footnote-80) It was from this perspective that he wrote, in *Socialism in Germany*, that the ‘German army is becoming more and more infected with socialism’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Whatever the practical limitations of the strategy that informed this claim, it was an interventionist revolutionary perspective and not as Martin Berger claims a ‘passive doctrine’.[[82]](#footnote-82)

And yet despite pointing towards a revolutionary response to militarism Engels’s conclusions were limited by time and place. While he recognised the radical change to the European theatre caused by the seizure of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870, he failed, unsurprisingly as it took a very embryonic form, to grasp the incipient trends towards what the next generation of Marxists would call imperialism. More problematically, while his comments about undermining the army from within are suggestive, they are overly schematic and too undeveloped to constitute a fully worked out political strategy. More prosaically, Engels should have been more alert to the tactical error of having a German try to explain why the French should not bow to chauvinism in relation to Alsace-Lorraine.

Nonetheless, this argument was consistent with the perspective he and Marx had tried to articulate since the 1840s: war and revolution were inextricably linked, and if the workers’ party was to have an independent perspective on politics it required an independent perspective on war. This project was admirably realised in 1848 through an analysis of the interrelationship between the various European empires and the position of the workers’ movement therein – notwithstanding the problems with the concept of non-historic nations this analysis was a *tour de force*. Subsequently, in essays such as *Po and Rhine*, he did all he could to undermine the arguments of the militarists by mounting a powerful immanent critique of their arguments. He did this while simultaneously articulating a parallel strategy for the workers’ movement. In a different register, in the essays he wrote for a socialist and working-class audience on this matter he viewed participation in parliamentary elections alongside support for universal conscription as two sides of the broader struggle to lay the foundations for the kind of proletarian challenge to state power that Lenin realised in Russia two decades after his death.

1. For criticisms of Engels’s thought see N. Levine, *The Tragic Deception: Marx Contra Engels* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1975); T. Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1989). For a more positive appreciation of his work see J.D. Hunley, *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On his reputation as a military thinker see T. Hunt, *Marx’s General* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2009), 216-222; Carver, 222-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. W.B. Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. S. Neuman and M. von Hagen ‘Engels and Marx on Revolution, War, and the Army in Society’ in P. Paret ed. *Masters of Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 265 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. M. Berger, *Engels, Armies and Revolution* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 50. For more critical voices see G. Neimanis, ‘Militia Versus the Standing Army in the History of Economic Thought from Adam Smith the Friedrich Engels’, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 1980: 28-32, p. 31. See also, R. Cohen-Almagor, ‘Foundations of Violence, Terror and War in the Writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* Vol. 3, No. 2, 1991: 1-24, p. 3 and E. Silberner, *The Problem of War in Nineteenth Century Economic Thought* (Princeton, 1946), p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. M. Kitchen, ‘Friedrich Engels’s Theory of War’, *Military Affairs* Vol. 41, No. 3, 1977: 119-124, p. 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. L. Freedman, *Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 247-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gallie, 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Berger, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. Rosdolsky, *Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ People* (London: Critique Books, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. F. Engels, ‘Supplement to the Preface of 1870 for The Peasant War in Germany’, *Marx and Engels Collected* Works (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975-2004) Vol. 23, 631 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. H. Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution Vol. V* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005); Berger; Freedman; G. Achcar, ‘Engels, Theorist of War, Theorist of Revolution’ *International Socialism* 2/97 2002; Neuman and von Hagen; B. Semmel, *Marxism and the Science of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Gallie. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kitchen, 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74; 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. F. Engels, ‘Introduction to Sigismund Borkheim’s Pamphlet, In Memory of the German Blood-and-Thunder Patriots 1806-1807’, *MECW* Vol. 26, 450 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. J. Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. F. Engels, ‘Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 227 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gallie, 87; L. Trotsky, *Military Writings* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971), 147; G. Haupt, *Aspects of International Socialism 1871-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 136-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. K. Marx and F. Engels ‘On Poland’, *MECW* Vol. 6, 389 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Draper, 19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. F. Engels, ‘The Frankfurt Assembly Debates the Polish Question’, *MECW* Vol. 7, 350 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 351 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 352 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 352 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. F. Engels, ‘The Beginning of the End in Austria’, *MECW* Vol. 6, 535-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Rosdolsky; see Draper for a critique of the dominant interpretation of Marx and Engels’s use of this Hegelian language*,* 189-213 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. F. Engels, ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany’, *MECW* Vol. 11, 51-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. F. Engels, ‘letter to Joseph Weydemeyer 10 June 1851’, *MECW* Vol. 38, 370; cf Berger, 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Semmel, 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. F. Engels, ‘The European War’ in *MECW*, Vol. 12, 557 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. F. Engels, ‘The Present Condition of the English Army’ in *MECW*, Vol. 13, 208-214 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. F. Engels, ‘Letter to Marx, 30 July 1862’ *MECW*, Vol. 41, 386-388; 400; Freedman, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. R. Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London: Verso, 2011), 38; 194-198; G. Mayer, *Friedrich Engels* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1936), p. 167; W.O. Henderson *The Life of Friedrich Engels* (London: Frank Cass, 1976) vol. 2, 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. F. Engels, ‘Notes on the [Franco-Prussian] war’, in *MECW* Vol. *22*, 23; 28; 158-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 98-99; 116; 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 240-241 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 104-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 172; 242. Martin Kitchen is right to point out that, notwithstanding his materialist method and the care with which he applied it, Engels refused to reduce the theory of war ‘to abstract “objective” principles’ (Kitchen, 119). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Paul Blackledge 2017, “Practical Materialism: Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* as Marxist Philosophy” *Critique* Vol. 47, No. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Neuman and von Hagen, 264 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. K. Marx ‘letter to Engels 25 February 1859’, *MECW* Vol. 40, 393 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. K. Marx ‘letter to Engels 7 May 1861’, *MECW* Vol. 41, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. F. Engels, ‘Po and Rhine’, *MECW* Vol. 16, 213-255 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Draper*,* 105-109 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. F. Engels, ‘Savoy, Nice and the Rhine’, *MECW* Vol. 16, 569-610 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Draper,159 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. F. Engels, ‘The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers’ Party’, *MECW* Vol. 20, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 74 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Draper, 116 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Engels, ‘The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers’ Party’, 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Engels, ‘Notes on the [Franco-Prussian] war’, 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 3-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Draper, 137-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. F. Engels, ‘letter to Marx 15 August 1870’, *MECW* Vol. 44, 45-48 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Draper, 121-157 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Engels, ‘Notes on the [Franco-Prussian] war’, 260 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. F. Engels, ‘The Role of Force in History’, *MECW* Vol. 26, 458-9; 483; 478; 498 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 491 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 495-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. F. Engels, ‘The Foreign Policy of Russian Tsardom’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Engels, ‘Introduction to Sigismund Borkheim’s Pamphlet, In Memory of the German Blood-and-Thunder Patriots 1806-1807’, 451 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Berger, 127; 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. F. Engels, ‘Letter to Paul Lafargue 25 March 1899’, *MECW* Vol. 48, 283 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Engels, ‘Can Europe Disarm’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 367-393 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Engels, ‘Introduction to Karl Marx’s The Class Struggles in France’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 518 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Achcar, 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. F. Engels, ‘Anti-Duhring’, *MECW* Vol. 25, 158 (emphasis in original) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. D. Losurdo, *War and Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. F. Engels, ‘Socialism in Germany’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 244 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. F. Engels, ‘Letter to August Bebel 24 October 1891’, *MECW* Vol. 49, 270 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Achcar, 77; Draper, 164-178 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. F. Engels, ‘Letter to Adolph Sorge 24 October 1891’, *MECW* Vol. 49, 266-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. F. Engels, ‘Conditions and Prospects of a War of the Holy Alliance Against France’, *MECW* Vol. 10, 560 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. F. Engels, ‘Letter to Laura Lafargue 17August 1891’, *MECW* Vol. 49, 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Mayer, *Friedrich Engels*, pp. 285-6; F. Engels, Letter to Paul Lafargue September 2, 1891’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 233; Kitchen, p. 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. F. Engels, ‘Socialism in Germany’, *MECW* Vol. 27, 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Berger, 166-169 [↑](#footnote-ref-82)