“History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme ...”

100 Years World War I - 100 Years of References, Fractures, Continuities and Interpretations.

Mark Twain is quoted to have written..."History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme"

In only a few months the anniversary of the outbreak of World War I is repeating itself for the 100th time. Only a few weeks later, the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the World War II is remembered. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation NRW and its partners take these anniversaries as an occasion for a conference with three set priorities and a focus on historical mentality approaches that will ask questions about connecting lines: What is the role of World War I for the structures and developments of National Socialism? What effects and references resulted additionally on World War I both upon and by the political Left? And finally, how can the memorial- and historical/political interpretations and viewpoints of the “Remembrance Year 2014” that speak of a "seminal catastrophe", civil break lines, and turning points or continuities during the "short 20th century", be classified?

World War I as a "machine for the brutalization of the world". War without end?

In recent years, questions regarding connecting long lines – about continuity, developments, breakthroughs and shifts – have become the center of attention when it comes to the escalations and delimitations of (political) violence of the 20th century, both in the academic field, as well as in political education. An increasing focus on World War I can be observed, which is not only seen as the “seminal catastrophe” (George F. Kennan) of the last century but also, more and more often, as an unprecedented impulse for the further development of radical nationalist, militarist and revanchist - beliefs and frames of actions of right anti-democratic movements. Because of these same political forces that began to emerge as fascist movements and parties in the overall political spectrum towards the end of the Weimarer Republic, World War I was, especially in the German Reich and in the first Republic, a catalyst for already existing ideologies and networks but also the root for new associations, such as the paramilitary Veterans Associations, awaking from the war. During this process political forces were formed which maintained, especially due to the lost war, immense exploitive powers. The international legal consequences (Treaty of Versailles) resulting from the defeat, as well as collectively -emotional turmoil ("stab legend") ensured that revanchist, chauvinistic, racist and anti-Semitic attitudes in parts of the German conservative, as well as the right-wing, were significantly radicalized.

The Republican government offered these developments also space for further development (Kapp Lüttwitz coup, exploitation of the “Ruhr struggle”, “Black Reichswehr” and Hitler - Ludendorff - Putsch). Together with much more long-term, timeless structures – especially considering body politics, concepts of soldiers and masculinity or social correlations of mass psychological binding forces – the “crisis years of classical modern times” ( Detlev Peukert ) were provided with fertile grounds for fascist thinking and acting in the early Weimarer Republic.

How to fight after this war? Internationalism and workers’ movement after the First World War

Also subject to inquiry is the effect of the war and the immediate post-war time on the developments of the workers’ movements and internationalism. This includes crisis and differentiation of the optimism regarding progress on one side, and division and re-organization of the oldest international soldiers’ community on the other. Which offers of policy, which societal utopia were the workers still
able to formulate after the struggle for a socialist emancipation had been sacrificed on the altars of patriotism? The divided political left of the Weimarer Republic was faced with enormous challenges, which could have paved the way to action. These remained unused on the national level, though. Which developmental prospects and scopes of action were available to the workers’ movement during the interwar period and what role did the “proletarian” war experience play? Can Eric Hobsbawm’s assessment of World War I as a “machine for the brutalization of the world” also be applied to the workers’ movement?

World War I in the 20th Century and today – interpretations and (historical and political) assignments in science and politics

This also poses the question of the medium- and long-term historical and political interpretations of World War I. What part does World War I play in the socialist, bourgeois, and fascist narratives of the interwar period? What does it look like more than half a century after the "Fischer Controversy”? Especially after Cristopher Clark’s analysis of the July crisis and breakout of the War in 1914 (“The Sleepwalkers”) – to name just one recent example – the question of the causes and responsibilities have become subject to highly problematic re-evaluation. The old theory, according to which the Great Powers "slipped into" the war, seems re-habilitated. In this light, the responsibilities for the outbreak of the World War I appear as the interplay of unfortunate circumstances and somnambulistic actors in the whirlpool of unpredictable events on the edge of the power centers of the old Central Europe.

But why do these and similar interpretations regarding the “war guilt” become so intense again today, 100 years after the outbreak of the war and 75 years after the onset of World War II? What do these historical and political developments say about the way hegemonic forces are interpreted in the Europe of 2014? After all, there are voices that analyze the actions of the so called “Crim Crisis” and draw comparisons to the great European powers on the eve of World War I. These same voices ask the question “is Europe about to slip into World War III?” 100 years after the outbreak of World War I historical and political interpretations and standpoints – whether regarding the July crisis of 1914, the "war guilt" or regarding the responsibility of a however issued European peace consciousness – are of, one might say, burning relevance.

History does not repeat itself ... but it does rhyme? Particularly in view of the recent debate about the outbreak of the First World War and its importance for political decisions that are appointed to it today, the question of left perspectives regarding World War I and requirements of a modern left peace policy needs to be asked.

An event organized by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation NRW.