Social Democrats were remarkably perceptive, first in conceptualising imperialism, and then in desper-ately attempting to awaken workers and even bour-geois politicians to the menace of imperialist war. During the entire decade prior to 1914, the socialist press sounded the alarm throughout Europe, yet these efforts ultimately ended in a political catastro-phe diminished only by the scale of the War itself – the collapse of the Second International.

On 1 August 1914, Germany declared war against Russia, followed, two days later, by the opening of hostilities with France. Thereafter, declarations of war spread across Europe. For Social Democrats, the most shocking consequence was the patriotic zeal with which workers rallied to the colours in the name of national ‘honour’ and ‘self-defence’. The workers of the world, whom Marx had summoned to defend each other against a common class-enemy, instead chose ‘fatherland’ and ‘flag’.

Most deplorable of all was the fact that many Social-Democratic parliamentarians, the same people who had been warning for years of the impending disaster, one after another declared support for the War. Their reasons were varied: some hoped to pro-tect workers’ organisations built up with such effort
in the prewar years; others thought military victory would either ensure democratic rights already won, or else bring democratic ‘rewards’ from grateful rulers once the War ended. But, no matter how the paralysis of socialist parties might be explained or rationalised, the inescapable fact was that August 1914 ended the great era of prewar Social Democracy.

In the spring of 1913, Anton Pannekoek had already denounced a foreboding precedent when 52 SPD deputies out of 96, with 7 abstentions, had contrived to support the Kaiser’s demand for credits with which to expand Germany’s armed forces. The crucial factor on this occasion was that the government proposed to finance the expenditure with direct, rather than indirect, taxes. Two bills were therefore under discussion: an armament bill and an appropriation bill. Once the first measure was passed in the Reichstag, despite SPD-opposition, the majority of SPD-deputies then acceded to the appropriation bill on the grounds that they were merely voting on the form of taxation, and the Party had always favoured direct taxes because they fell more heavily on the wealthy.¹

Pannekoek and Luxemburg both denounced this ruse as a fundamental abandonment of principle. In September, Luxemburg wrote ‘After the Jena Congress’, an article considered so radical in its denunciation of reformism that it was not published until 1927. ‘What,’ she demanded, ‘has been expressed by this “new era” of the property tax in Germany? Nothing more than the fact that in its advance, German militarism has even abandoned its convoluted indirect taxation system and now demands that the bourgeoisie be partially drawn in to cover its costs.’² If the operative formula had now become approval for military funds through direct taxation – provided it could ‘be represented as the sole means of avoiding the placing of a burden on the people through more adverse taxes’ – then the Party had implicitly given ‘carte blanche for all budget approvals’, since any budget could ‘be portrayed as the “prevention” of another, more adverse one’.³ Luxemburg argued that the only proper response to ‘the immense military bill’ would have been to

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¹ On the debate over funding for the military budget [Deckungsfrage], i.e. the approval of taxes for military purposes by the SPD-representatives in the Reichstag in 1913, see Walling (ed.) 1915, pp. 64–81.
² Luxemburg 1913c, p. 348.
³ Luxemburg 1913c, p. 350.