

Bitter US-European tensions mark centenary of World War I armistice in Paris

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This weekend, heads of state from 70 countries met in Paris to mark the centenary of the end of World War I, amid rising conflicts between the great powers and growing popular anger. Despite the ritualistic criticisms of nationalism and calls for peace, it is clear that none of the “world leaders” in Paris had any plan to halt the accelerating collapse of international relations between the major powers.

Arriving in Paris to protests by thousands of people on Republic Square, Donald Trump fired off a Tweet denouncing European Union (EU) plans to build an army aimed at the United States, Russia and China. Trump wrote, “President Macron of France has just suggested that Europe build its own military in order to protect itself from the US, China and Russia. Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the US subsidizes greatly!”

Macron’s call last week for “a real European army” so Europeans can “protect themselves from China, Russia and even the United States” reflected a deep breakdown of the US-EU relations. After US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson’s threat to “take out” Russian missiles in Europe and Trump’s call to cancel the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, his ability to hold on to the US Senate in the midterm elections shocked European ruling circles.

Facing the prospect of a major US nuclear arms build-up targeting Russia, and more trade war threats from the White House against hundreds of billions of dollars of European and Chinese goods, they are stepping up calls to militarize the EU.

Trump retaliated on Saturday by refusing to attend ceremonies for US war dead at the military cemetery in Belleau Wood, 50 miles from Paris. As light rain fell across the Paris metro area, the White House justified this decision by ludicrously citing “scheduling and

logistical difficulties caused by the weather.”

Yesterday, the heads of state including Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel came together at the Arch of Triumph in Paris to listen to a speech by Macron. International media largely present Macron’s speech as a criticism of nationalism—and so, by implication, of Trump’s “America First” nationalism.

In fact, Macron’s speech was itself an ignorant and nationalistic paean to war. While decrying its 10 million dead, 6 million maimed, 3 million widows, 6 million orphans, and millions of civilian casualties, Macron hailed the war for supposedly allowing patriotism to overcome France’s class divisions. He said it built “one united France, rural and urban; bourgeois, aristocratic and popular; of every color, where priests and anti-clericals suffered side by side; and whose heroism and pain made us.”

Implicitly rebuking Trump’s recent boast that he is a nationalist, Macron clumsily tried to argue that his own invocation of the war was not nationalist, but patriotic. He called patriotism “the exact opposite of nationalism: nationalism betrays patriotism. By saying ‘our interests first and pay the others no heed,’ one destroys the most precious thing a Nation has, what makes it live and encourages it to be great, what is most important: its moral values.”

Macron’s moralizing deserves only contempt. The reactionary content of his invocations of nationalism was exposed last week—when he prompted shock and revulsion across France by insisting that it is legitimate to honor Philippe Pétain, the fascist dictator of France’s Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II, as a great general.

Macron’s remarks Sunday underscore that his statement of support for Pétain was not accidental, but

is deeply rooted in his politics. Indeed, his hailing of war as the cement of national unity echoes the views of the fascistic groups that backed Pétain between the world wars, and then became Vichy's social base.

In reality, across Europe and internationally, the world war was a crisis of international capitalism that escalated class tensions to the point of revolution. Under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the working class took power in Russia in October 1917 and took Russia out of the war. This led to a wave of revolutionary struggles across Europe that toppled the German and Austrian empires, and the emergence of mass communist parties in the working class in countries across the world, including France.

A century later, none of the contradictions of capitalism that led to war and social revolution—above all, that between global economy and the nation-state system—have been resolved. With trade wars and arms races spreading between the major powers, it is clear that the same inter-imperialist struggles for profit and strategic advantage that produced two world wars in the 20th century are rapidly escalating. After the G7 summit of the main NATO powers plus Japan collapsed in June, European-American relations are on the verge of disintegration.

Yesterday afternoon, Trump skipped a “Forum for Peace” held by Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel and instead went to the Suresnes American Cemetery to speak. “We are gathered together at this hallowed resting place to pay tribute to the brave Americans who gave their last breath in that mighty struggle,” he said. “It is our duty to preserve the civilization they defended and to protect the peace they so nobly gave their lives to secure one century ago.”

Trump's call to protect the peace is fatuous and absurd. US policy under successive administrations both Republican and Democratic over more than a quarter century since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been relentless neocolonialist wars across the Middle East. The fact that this has now led Washington to repudiate all nuclear arms control treaties in order to step up nuclear threats against Russia in Europe, and China in Asia, is a warning of the enormous dangers posed to the working class and, indeed, all of humanity by imperialism.

The “Peace Forum” attended by Merkel and Macron

was itself no less bankrupt. Merkel—whose Grand Coalition government in Berlin has played a major role in inciting nationalism and far-right politics, by constantly pushing to militarize German foreign policy and prepare for war—delivered a warning on the lessons of World War I. “One hundred years later,” she said, “we look back on this war, it makes us aware of the devastating consequences that the lack of communications and unwillingness to compromise in politics and diplomacy can have.”

Merkel did not say, however, how she intended to overcome the repeated failure to reach an acceptable compromise in the rising number of disputes between Washington and the EU.

In fact, European governments' relentless incitement of nationalism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and militarism encourages violent far-right extremists across Europe to prepare terror attacks and assassinations.

Yesterday it emerged that while investigating Franco A., a far-right extremist who had planned terror attacks in order to blame them on refugees, German police uncovered a far larger, far-right plot. Some 200 soldiers linked to the Special Forces Command (KSK) had prepared a plan for “Day X” to murder left-wing politicians. Targets allegedly included Left Party politician Dietmar Bartsch, Green Party leader Claudia Roth, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and ex-president Joachim Gauck. Franco A. himself was released last year.

Such plots are spreading across Europe. On November 6, six far-right supporters were arrested for plotting “violent action” against Macron. Similarly, a 63-year-old former soldier was arrested with 16 firearms in Spain, for plotting to attack social-democratic Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez.



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