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# Peace Is War

Gilles Dauvé

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2023 May 17

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This was first published in French as *La Paix, c'est la guerre*:  
<<https://troploin.fr/node/104>>. Most of it was translated by  
Jake Bellone for the Insurgent Note website. We have gone  
back to the original text and re-written a lot of it to give a  
modified and slightly updated version.

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2023 May 17



Three of our texts in French:

10 + 1 questions sur la guerre du Kosovo (1999)

On the war against the Islamic State: *Brouillards de guerre*  
(2016): <<https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?s=Brouillards+de+guerre>>

“Let’s not bury nationalism too soon. If what the former Yugoslavia went through after 1980 was not enough, let us turn our gaze to Ukraine today.”

*La Nation dans tout son état*, 2019: Part 1 <[https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page\\_id=2158](https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page_id=2158)>, Part 2 <[https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page\\_id=2176](https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page_id=2176)>.

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Pierre Lanneret, *1914–1946: Third camp internationalists in France during World War II*, can be found on libcom.org. Short but stimulating account of how a minority resisted.

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Lenin, 1915: Revolutionary Marxists at the International Socialist Conference

Rosa Luxemburg, The Junius Pamphlet, 1915, chapter 8.

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Otto Rühle, Which Side to Take, 1940.

## For further reading

A precise analysis of the outbreak and early course of the war: Tristan Leoni:

Farewell to Love... Ukraine, War & Self-Organisation

On the 21<sup>st</sup> century international backdrop (and the Iraq war):

*Call of the Void* (2003): <<https://troploin.fr/node/20>>

Why in 1924 Trotsky thought war was inevitable between Britain and the US:

Perspectives of World Development: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/v1/ch02k.htm>>

Richard K. Betts, “Pick Your Battles: Ending America’s Era of Permanent War”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014.

John Mearsheimer, *We’re playing Russian roulette*, November 2022, on the unherd.com site. By a promoter of the “realist” school of foreign policy, which champions the preservation of a balance of power between dominant countries.

On the relations between NATO, Russia, and Ukraine: Tariq Ali, “Before the War”, *London Review of Books*, March 24, 2022.

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On the flooding of the Yellow River by the nationalist army in 1938: Rana Mitter, *China’s War with Japan 1937–1945*, Penguin, 2014.

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“Small countries, such as Belgium, should be well-advised to rally to the side of the strong if they wished to retain their independence.” (Kaiser Wilhelm II to Belgian King Albert, November 1913)

“It may even be true that none of the States concerned ‘wanted’ war: it is certainly true that none of them wanted war if they could achieve their objects without. What is more important is that without exception they were pursuing policies of which war was the inevitable outcome.” (A.L. Morton, *A People’s History of England*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1979 [1938], chapter XVI, § 4, “The Road to Sarajevo”)

“A great war is inevitable in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it will suppose a maturing economic crisis, massive overproduction, a sharp fall in profitability, exacerbated social conflicts and commercial antagonisms, resulting in a new division of the world.” (*10 + 1 Questions sur la guerre au Kosovo*, 1999)

“Don’t believe the propaganda, they’re lying to you here.” (Marina Ovsyannikova, interrupting a TV news programme on one of Russia’s main channels)

“War for peace”, “the cause of the weak against the strong”, “crimes against humanity perpetrated in the heart of Europe... a battle for civilisation”, “a genocide in progress in Ukraine”...

The first quote is from *Droit du Peuple*, a socialist paper, the second from the *London Times*, a bourgeois paper, both written in 1914; the third comes from the Prime Minister of France during the 1999 Kosovo war, and the last from the Ukrainian Prime Minister, March 9, 2022.

French media will never talk about the dictatorship in Chad (supported by France) as they do about the Belorussian dictatorship (supported by Russia). No more than Western media will invoke the millions of civilians killed by the French and American armies in the wars in Indochina in the same way as they comment on the massacre of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian army today. As for the 150,000 killed in Yemen, mainly by US, British and French weapons, they seldom make the BBC News at Ten.

Verbal inflation gnaws away at the meaning of words. In particular, genocide becomes a synonym for large scale massacre, whereas the word designates the extermination of *a people as a people*, which Hitler did to European Jews. But Stalin was not exterminating the Ukrainian *people* as such in the 1930's, and Pol Pot was not trying to exterminate the Cambodian *people*. Nor is Putin now trying to annihilate the Ukrainian *people*.

Everything seems permitted in political mythology. Socialism having become openly *national* in 1914, the Nazis could claim the word: *Nazi* literally means "national socialist". If ideologies are confused and confusing, if anyone can lay claim to *socialism*, to *communism*, to *proletariat*, even to *revolution* (such was the title of a book by the incumbent President of the French Republic), it is because up till now social movements have not made a radical break with the order of things.

It is when we are reduced to passivity by failed or deviated struggles that we receive information and images as spectators of a reality against which we cannot act. Only deeper struggles will give back meaning to words... *revolution* included.

in "the national question", "the overwhelming majority of the working people will inevitably decide it in favour of their bourgeoisie." (At least temporarily, that is.) The past century has rather proved him right.

*In the short term*, the Ukrainian population, proletarians included, have few options : defending themselves (= joining the government's war effort in one way or other), or lying low, or even trying to evade conscription. Meanwhile, "revolutionary defeatism" only has reality in the aggressor's country. After the war broke out, Russian anarchists set fire to army recruitment centres, Belorussian railway workers sabotaged tracks used to convey Russian troops and supplies to Ukraine, while various dissidents voiced their opposition to the war on social media. How widespread these (usually clandestine) networks are and what impact they could have is unknown but, more important, there are reports of Russian servicemen refusing to go and fight, even more so since the partial mobilisation of reservists.

If these movements happened to continue, if protest grew within Russia and the invading troops, if the war was grinding on and becoming unpopular because of the army being bogged down, and if too many "zinc coffins" started coming home, there could be defections, desertions, mutinies or even fraternisation with Ukrainian soldiers. At the time of writing (April 2023), this is not the case (yet ?).

In 1940, Otto Rühle wrote: "The question confronting us today is whether Liebknecht's slogan 'The enemy is at home !' is as valid now for the working class as it was in 1914." To which he answered: "No matter to which side the proletariat offers itself, it will always be among the defeated. Therefore it must not side with the democracies, nor with the totalitarians."

G.D. (April 2023)

We are neither pacifist nor non-violent: social revolutionary upheavals imply a recourse to arms. But an armed struggle, even self-organised, is not enough to challenge the foundations of society. In itself, a movement of partisans, however large, can contribute to the enemy's defeat without necessarily initiating structural changes. In real life, "Ukrainian politics carries on in the background, shutting down opposition parties, monopolizing television broadcasts" with "attacks on those dissenting from the patriotic consensus" (V. Ishchenko). National unity is unfavourable to profound social transformation. By definition, "the Ukrainian people" gathers *all* Ukrainians, and the post-war period will not go against the interests of the ruling classes. At best some mild reforms might come out of it, but Ukraine will remain a country of low wages and poor protection of labour rights.

An altogether different matter would be the emergence of groups large enough to head the resistance towards a situation of "dual power", ending up in confronting a Russian army tired out by the stalemate, to the point of desertions and mutinies, *as well as* confronting a Ukrainian State also contested from within. We are clearly not there. There are not *three* forces vying for power in Ukraine now: the Russian invader, the official Ukrainian army, plus a popular democratic armed movement that could grow (and take over?). There are *two armies* fighting an inter-State war in which grassroots efforts play an auxiliary role.

War mends social fractures as much as it aggravates divisions, and many a political change can come out of these troubled times providing they appear to offer a viable solution: the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917, the fascists in Italy in 1922. The shock of war does not *ipso facto* entail rebellion, and anti-war attitudes are known to have taken the most diverse forms: revolutionary, conservative, reactionary... Exactly one hundred years before Russia attacked Ukraine, Lenin, who in terms of revolutionary defeatism spoke from experience, asserted that

## Impossible predictions, theoretical certainties

Who could have known that in 2022 Russia would launch an invasion of a large part of Ukrainian territory ?

"We are going straight towards an armed conflict between England and the United States [and] this conflict can be dated with maximum certitude", Trotsky declared at the 3<sup>rd</sup> congress of the Communist International on June 23, 1921, a forecast he again developed at length in 1924.

A century later, we ignore the fault lines and demarcations of "camps" engaged in future conflicts. But we know that rivalries between great capitalist powers – the US dominant today, China, Russia, the European Union up till now incapable of constituting itself into a political entity – build up the conditions for regional war, and one day world war.

Everything is done to persuade us that modern States give in to violence for motives outside of the profound nature of a supposedly peace-loving capitalist system. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are told, Russia's going to war is caused by the return of an obnoxious nationalism fortunately outgrown in the West but revived in the East by a dictatorial regime with outrageous ambitions.

In reality, competition between capitalist firms has never been soft, nor has international commerce been a factor of lasting peace. Contrary to common opinion (taken up before 1914 by certain socialists like Kautsky), the economic interdependence of great powers has never impeded war. Industrial and mercantile dynamism develops one zone at the expense of another, creates rival poles, each based on a territory with a State power that has military forces at its disposal.

## Peaceful West, bellicose Russia

American capitalism rarely needs to occupy a foreign country for long: its economic superiority, its higher productivity, its direct foreign investments give the US a sufficient control of large parts of the world without sending in troops. In Italy and France after 1945, and in Western Europe after 1991, American power relied as much on multinationals as on GIs. Germany and Japan were only occupied as a consequence of the Second World War, and the maintenance of American troops aimed at containing its big rival – the USSR. The US does not hesitate to intervene militarily, as it did on its Mexican border in 1914, but only to re-install in power political leaders favourable to American business, without any need to cross the Rio Grande to promote its investments in *maquiladoras*.

By contrast, though a superpower, Russia (like the bygone USSR) is based on a much less dynamic capitalism compared to that of the US, Western Europe and China. Most of its strength on the world market comes from gas and oil exports, and it tends to exercise direct control over its neighbours to ensure they remain within its orbit. Not only, like the OPEC countries, does it use its role as a large producer of raw materials as an economic and political weapon, but its military power allows it (for the moment anyway) to subjugate the countries of Central Asia, and to play an international role which is beyond the means of most countries (including China, for the moment). It is not illogical for Russian leaders in a minor position on the world market to believe that they can guarantee the power of their country (and their own perpetuation at the top) by resorting more directly than their rivals to the force of arms. After 1945, the Soviet giant had no interest in trying to take over Western Europe: in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia's relative weakness creates a risk of war in the whole of Europe. After the forced secession of peripheral regions (Transnistria, Abkhasia, and Ossetia), and the occupation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine is

volunteers, military and nursing training courses, refugee centres, barter (swapping weapons for a vehicle), mixing “civil” solidarity with “armed” self-defense of a town by the locals, sometimes bypassing government channels, even with a small measure of grassroots democracy.

Outside Ukraine, a widespread position among “radical” milieus consists in advocating and practising a form of revolutionary defeatism, but *only in one of the two camps*, in *Russia*, to weaken its war effort, while supporting a supposedly autonomous resistance inside Ukraine, naively hoping in a “war anarchism” founded on the cherished horizontal volunteerism that has flourished since the Russian invasion.” (Volodymyr Ishchenko)

That is forgetting that the people's multiform reaction only parallels and completes “official” military action. The belief that some self-management of armed struggle would be on its way is based on no concrete evidence. The situation being what it is, it is impossible for the population to protect themselves otherwise than by relying on the State, which implies supporting it, whether one likes it or not. There is no Ukrainian people fighting autonomously alongside the State without being overseen and controlled by it. State power is not challenged. On this subject, reference to the Spanish war is particularly ill-chosen. In the Summer of '36, some anarchists accepted the maintenance of a bourgeois government under pretext that it did not detain *real* power, which apparently was in the hands of the popular classes leading the anti-Franco war by their autonomous organisations. Those anarchists were proved cruelly wrong less than a year later. May '37 showed *who had effective power* : the Republican State repressed the most radical (at least 500 deaths in Barcelona), dismantled the worker militias, definitively transformed an insurrectionary movement into a front-line war, and won the game against the proletarians before losing it to Franco.



## Revolutionary defeatism ?

“What use is an internationalist principle if your village is being shelled by a Russian tank ? To what extent do workers in Ukraine just have to defend themselves against a military aggression ? Could we tell people in the Warsaw ghetto, in Srebrenica, or in the moment of an ISIS attack, not to take up arms, because their arms might be supplied by nationalists or that their resistance falls in line with the interests of one of the big imperialist powers ?”, asked a participant in a debate organised by Angry Workers on March 12, 2022. “I guess we can’t”, was the answer.

(In passing, it is misleading to compare Ukrainians led to protect themselves against an invasion, and the insurgents of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. With their back to the wall, lacking any exterior support and destined for a certain death, the ghetto Jews preferred to die with their weapons in hand. The Ukrainians today fortunately have more than this sole option.)

If the question is legitimate, it also was in the Summer of 1914, when the inhabitants of Belgian villages were being shelled by German guns and the invaders shot thousands of civilians. The logic of the above-mentioned suggested answer is that the “internationalist principle” is no longer valid when people “have to defend themselves”, by whatever means available. Even if this implies siding with governmental forces. Such is the rationale behind the position of a number of Ukrainian anarchists.

Others try to escape conscription – a far from easy choice.

In any case, answering in the place of the Ukrainians is impossible, and devoid of practical consequence. We have *no immediate* solution to historical emergencies, and communist minorities do not have the capacity to do more than proletarians themselves in the time and space they live in.

Undoubtedly, in reaction to Russian aggression, a collective resistance was born: village and neighbourhood mutual aid,

a new effort of Russia to preserve what it is struggling to hold together.

But why engage today in such a large scale operation ?

In the aftermath of 1945, the USSR had an empire, and the US half the planet. America entered an era of expansion and felt no need to take over the Polish or Chinese market. Russia meanwhile consolidated its capital accumulation without anything to offer Western Europe other than ideology.

Confrontation took place on the periphery (Korea, Indochina, the Middle East, Africa) and when the US and USSR were heading over a cliff (the Cuban missile crisis, 1962), both sides stepped back. Each power recognised the rival’s hegemony over its “own” dominion, where each was given a free hand to act more or less as it wanted (Guatemala 1954, Hungary 1956, the Berlin Wall 1961, Czechoslovakia 1968, etc.). Numerous crises were overcome without direct confrontation in Europe, and the Berlin blockade in 1948–49 was more of a tug-of-war which eventually proved American economic superiority.

Nevertheless, though the two camps were relatively equal in the sense that each refrained from direct interference in the opponent’s domain, the specific nature of “bureaucratic” capitalism had a major bearing on its foreign and military policy.

The USSR had succeeded in promoting industrialisation and building up a powerful arms economy, but showed itself incapable of organising labour and capital in a profitable way. The domination of a class collectively owning both capital and State curbed competition – an essential prime mover of capitalism – and ended creating fiefdoms drawing their power not from a higher industrial and commercial productivity, but from privileged links with the State. The crisis of “bureaucratic” capitalism ended by its dissolving into a system where “oligarchs” only managed monopolies dependent on political power. Unlike China, Russia is unable to compete on the world market and in overseas investment, and military power (bolstered by

nuclear weaponry) remains the prime foreign asset of its rulers. However reliable GNP statistics are, they give an order of magnitude : in dollars, GNP is about \$ 20 trillion for the United States, \$ 13 trillion for China, \$ 4 trillion for Germany, and \$ 1.6 trillion for Russia, roughly the equivalent of South Korea or Italy. Russia is a superpower, albeit a middle-rank regional one.

After 1989, the superior dynamism of the US and Western Europe ended up peacefully retaking the Eastern Europe that the Red Army had conquered in 1945.

It is frequently the *lesser* big power which takes the initiative of the offensive. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when “Britannia ruled the waves”, it only attacked non-industrialised “backward” countries, waging wars in India and Africa. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other imperialisms challenged British hegemony: German industrial growth undermined European “stability” (and the rise of Japan threatened American and British interests in Asia). After 1945, big powers did not fight each other for decades thanks to the Russian-American division of the world (India staying apart, China too).

From Korea to Afghanistan, not forgetting Vietnam and Angola, the USSR and the US never ceased their proxy wars. Meanwhile, Soviet imperialism exercised control over its area of influence, compensating for its social shortcomings by protecting itself behind neighbouring satellites that served as a buffer between two separate (but never watertight) blocs. This safety margin no longer exists: NATO has progressively expanded in the East of Europe, and now the North: with the invasion of Ukraine, Finland (a longtime “vassal” of the USSR) and Sweden (a traditionally “neutral” country) are joining the alliance.

In 1998, George Kennan (1904–2005), an architect of anti-Soviet *containment* after 1945, thought this extension was unwise. “We are engaged in protecting an entire group of countries without having either the means or the intention of seriously doing so.” Ten years later, a CIA report warned against

This prospect had been considered by Engels : “It is a manifest fact that the disorganisation of armies and a total relaxation of discipline have been both precondition and consequence of all successful revolutions hitherto.” (Letter to Marx, September 26, 1851) Engels later went back to this possibility : “Best of all would be a Russian revolution which, however, can only be expected after severe defeats have been inflicted on the Russian army.” (Letter to Bebel, September 13, 1886) Bolshevik strategy only made sense on the assumption “that the war [was] creating a revolutionary situation in Europe” (Lenin, 1915): whoever won or lost, inevitable economic and political collapse would spur mass revolts. Therefore Lenin called for a split (which Rosa Luxemburg at that time thought premature) within the Second International: anti-reformist internationalist minorities had to separate from patriotic and opportunistic elements in order to (re)create revolutionary parties.

A century later, our situation obviously differs, notably because of the absence of substantial radical minorities similar to those Lenin and Luxemburg belonged to. And in the last decades, opposition to imperialist wars (in 2003 against the invasion of Iraq, for example) has been simply pacifist, or incapable of having an impact on the events.

“Calls for desertion, defeatism, and sabotage of the war on both sides, issued today by various groups, are certainly the only viable position from the class point of view. They are commendable and shareable – and certainly more dignified than the unilateral anti-imperialism of those who feel obliged every time to support the ‘weaker’ imperialism. This, at least, in principle. But such calls risk being, in fact, if not ‘ideological’, in any case utterly sterile.” (Lato Cattivo)

the bud. Nothing was planned *in case it did break out*, because people preferred to believe this was unlikely. In fact, the threat of calling for a general strike (peaceful for the reformists, insurrectionary for the radicals) had as little reality as the proclaimed intention to make a revolution... some day.

Among most future belligerents, the month between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Serbia was marked by numerous massive demonstrations and meetings against the threat of war: but their goal was to exert pressure on bourgeois governments, not to call the proletarians to act by themselves as a class different from and opposed to the bourgeoisie. This was logical: for decades, the vast majority of socialists and trade-unionists (and some anarchists) had behaved as working-class *antagonists and partners* of the bourgeois world. Whatever the ideology, accepting the essentials of the existing society had paved the way to accepting major decisions taken by its leaders : deciding to go to war was not an exception. In the Summer of 1914, the Second International perhaps was unfaithful to its discourse, certainly not to its practice.

Faced with what the proletariat had been unable or unwilling to prevent, Lenin argued that every revolutionary should wish for (and possibly contribute to) the defeat of their own country: from the point of view of the interests of the Russian working class and toiling masses, the “lesser evil” would be the defeat of the Russian monarchy. Lenin thought future revolts would occur in the Russian army as they did in 1905. He reckoned that the capitalist world’s general crisis, momentarily overcome by the “Sacred Union”, would inevitably erupt again, exacerbated by the pursuit of the war.

Once the conflict started, in the beginning, only a small minority could share Liebknecht’s conviction that the enemy of every proletarian is in their own country. “Revolutionary defeatism” could only become a groundswell when the stalemate on the front wore out military and patriotic energies.

Ukraine joining NATO: this would be crossing the most dangerous line in the eyes of the Russian rulers, and would encourage Russian interference in Crimea and in the east of Ukraine.

Those who preach moderation forget that “containing” never excluded “rolling back” when the US decided it was necessary and possible, as Truman and Eisenhower amply demonstrated in their time. A State or alliance takes the opportunity to advance its pawns where its competitor shows signs of weakness. This is exactly what the USSR repeatedly attempted to do, creating an autonomous Azerbaijani Republic in the north of Iran, placing nuclear missiles in Cuba, making moves in Asia and Africa...

In 2014, Richard K. Betts, an academic and US government consultant, advised the “United States to refocus its priorities on planning for conventional interstate wars. The United States’ top priority should be the defense of long-standing allies in Europe and Asia. This task became largely passé as the Cold War gave way to a long holiday from great-power conflict, but recent events have ended that holiday.”

The holiday is over indeed.

Whatever Russo-Ukrainian peace will settle, war will continue by other means. Regarding Europe, the question is whether the European Union will remain what it is now, i.e. a free exchange zone, or whether it will give itself a proper political leadership, boosted by a Franco-German axis, in order to build an effective “European” army. Such a hypothesis appears less and less probable in view of the present reinforcement of US dominance over NATO. In any case, winning (or not losing) does not have the same meaning at all for Russia (a strong but regional power) and for the United States, which is now refocusing its world power against its probable main adversary: China. But we will avoid imitating Trotsky with adventurous predictions. Suffice it to recall how, in 1939, the unexpected Soviet-Nazi pact of non-aggression altered the course of events in Europe for nearly two years.

## Rationality = 600 million deaths

The Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise. In 2014, the rebels' vulnerability in the east of the country prompted Russia to intervene militarily to bolster the new-born "peoples' republic" of Donetsk and Luhansk, and to annex Crimea. Still, escalating civil war into inter-State war, invading a large part of Ukraine and besieging Kiev was taking a quantum leap forward...

This invites scrutiny of how States act "rationally".

In 1982, was it "rational" for Britain to send an army to the edge of the world in order to recover the Falklands – islands devoid of economic or strategic importance ?

One could reasonably estimate that Hitler had no chance of winning against the Anglo-American-Russian coalition, but he thought it possible to defeat the USSR *before* the US mobilised all its industrial might. As is well known, war is the realm of uncertainty. In 1914, all general staffs imagined they would finish the job in six months. When they entered Afghanistan, Russians (1979), then Americans (2001) believed a massive and high-tech intervention would allow them to vanquish an adversary that was considered, rather logically, as a military inferior. Through it, the real objective was to consolidate an empire – quasi-colonial for the USSR, economic for the USA – against their main rival, at a cost initially deemed reasonable. Both imperialisms could reassure themselves by recalling their successful foreign operations: Hungary in 1956, Santo Domingo in 1965.

But the issue is never essentially military. In 1918, the belligerents stopped fighting, less constrained by the stalemate on the ground than by the crumbling of the home front, above all in Germany and Austria-Hungary. In the second world war, the Nazi regime did the opposite : it waged a "total war" to the finish, because its essential aim was Germany's domination over the whole of Europe, and if the German people did not turn out

France and Britain in Egypt the same year, the US in Vietnam, the USSR in Afghanistan, etc. The weak country only survives because some strong country protects it against the evil intentions of another strong one." (Tristan Leoni)

## 1914–2022

In the decades before 1914, Engels was not alone in anticipating a European conflagration. He foresaw "a war that will involve 10 to 15 million combatants, unparalleled devastation [...] the compulsory and universal suppression of our [socialist] movement, the recrudescence of chauvinism in every country [...] a period of reaction based on the inanition of all the peoples bled white. [...] Our party in Germany, temporarily overwhelmed by the tide of chauvinism, would be dispersed, while exactly the same would happen in France." Still, with the "irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in absolute bankruptcy [and] collapse of the old States [...] only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class." (Letter to Paul Lafargue, March 25, 1889) In other words, capitalism would come to (self)breaking- point. One could hardly be more perceptive and more wrong at the same time.

In the face of growing militarism, the worker and socialist movement was far from inactive. In the same way as it agitated in the factory, in the street (and in parliament), it attempted to intervene within the military institution: the French General Confederation of Labour used to send a small sum of money to its conscripted trade union members in order to keep alive their link with the working class. But unions and parties envisioned nothing else but a mass "struggle for peace" that was supposed to make war impossible. And if war happened to be in the offing, an international general strike would nip it in

2022, the confrontation went a huge step forward when Russia decided on a full-scale invasion.

What precipitated the escalation : NATO's over-expansion, or Russia's refusal to accept Ukraine becoming a Western bulwark on its borders ? A moot point. War is usually reached by a zig-zag path. Briefly put, NATO's capabilities along Russian borders from north to south increased over the years, Russia took over Crimea in 2014, invaded Ukraine in 2022, expected a quick victory, found itself locked in a war of attrition, while NATO now leads a proxy war against Russia – this time dangerously close to Europe's heartland.

In 1948, Israël was attacked by all its Arab neighbours. In 1956 and 1967, Israël attacked Egypt. In 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israël... How to draw a line between *pre-emptive* and *offensive* wars ?

In the West, Ukraine is portrayed as the victim of a big bully. So was in 1914 little Serbia (population: 5 million) under the iron heel of the mighty Austro-Hungarian empire (50 million). (Actually, in today's parlance, 1914 Serbia could be called a "rogue State" for harbouring – anti-Austrian – "terrorists".) In the broader picture, however, Serbia was part (and prey) of one imperialist bloc against another. Likewise, Ukraine is not a peace-loving unarmed country under attack from a over-mighty neighbour. Russia is fighting not just Ukraine, but the whole of NATO, with a Washington-London-Berlin-Warsaw-Kiev axis versus a Moscow-Tehran-Pyongyang-Peking axis (until further realignments). As the fighting intensifies and more weaponry keeps pouring in from abroad, one wonders who's small and who's big.

"Who initiates a war or who triggers its outbreak is only part of a complex situation. [...] Every warring country can rightly claim it is defending itself, the invaded against the invader of course, but also the invader merely trying to prevent a *third* party from occupying or dominating that country in its own interest. This is what the USSR did in Hungary in 1956,

equal to the destiny assigned to it by the Nazis, for Hitler, Germany deserved to perish. Ordinarily, the prime purpose of war is to conquer or impose the victor's will, destruction is a means to this end, and it is not in the victor's interest to destroy everything, himself included – yet in 1945 Nazi logic accepted the self-destruction of Germany as a unified country. War opposes two forces, neither of which decides what the other will do, and the reciprocity of actions contains the possibility of their exacerbation. Therefore self-restraint (i.e. to avoid destroying what one wants to conquer) inevitably finds its own limits. It's one thing to commit murder, another to commit suicide, often one excludes the other: Hitler's singularity was to do both. Nazis were consistent with themselves: for them, politics was "all or nothing".

Putin is no Hitler. But for Putin as well as for many heads of State, the boundary between a partial objective (to modify a border) and a total objective (to impose a change of policy or to neutralise a country) is easily blurred, and sometimes a country's leaders go so far that they exceed their limits.

After all, what is a war won or lost ? And above all, what's the aftermath ? We read that the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan ended in failure, but in Baghdad as in Kabul, it was more of a full-scale police operation abroad, conducted by a big country against a small one. No major American interests, let alone survival, were at stake. In Vietnam, the prime motive was not to occupy the country, but to no longer feel threatened by the progress of the USSR via one of its allies. Did the US lose in Vietnam in 1975, when this country has now been opened for twenty years to foreign capitalists in search of law and order and low wages ?

Whatever conclusion the Russo-Ukrainian affair will have, in their conflict with Russia, the US and the European Union seek to place themselves in a position of force against China. There used to be two nuclear superpowers: now there are three (four or five counting India and Pakistan). If a future use of

atomic weapons is by no means certain, we would be naive to rule it out. It would certainly have catastrophic effects for humankind, therefore also for the winning side and its rulers, possibly forced by nuclear devastation to live in underground bunkers for years or decades.

Nevertheless, the criterion for the “vital interests” of a nation, and for the means chosen to defend them, is neither ethics nor abstract reasoning. If he had had the atom bomb, Hitler the Nazi would not have hesitated to use it. Truman the democrat had it, hesitated (can this be a difference between fascism and democracy ?), mainly for practical reasons, and used it twice.

Five years later, faced with the setbacks suffered in Korea, the president of the USA declared that he was considering all possibilities, “which includes all the weapons we have”, i.e. also nuclear weapons: “we have seriously thought about it.” The nuclear threat was reiterated by Nixon against North Vietnam (1969) and Trump against North Korea (2017).

In the 1960s, assessing that the USSR would be incapable of surviving a first atom strike and retaliate with significant reprisals, the American General Staff contemplated the option of an atomic attack against the USSR and China, which would have caused around 400 million deaths, plus 100 million in neighbouring countries and as many in Western Europe, i.e. 600 million in all. Absurd, one might object: the price would be too high... but for whom ? Rulers are not demented. Neither are generals bloodthirsty. Though this be madness, yet there is method in it, as Shakespeare wrote. Mass killing can be justified : a monstrous enemy (any enemy easily qualifies as a monster) demands the use of means more awesome than his.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US has updated its plans, and Russia and China have theirs. State rationality commands to act according to the interests of the country and the interests of its leaders (they happen to coincide). The objective is to perpetuate oneself, not to commit suicide, but disproportionality and excess are part of the equation. In 1914, empires

hoped to repair this failure by expanding its ambitions beyond the Donbas.

The peoples’ republics of Luhansk and Donetsk are mere pseudo-States born under the armed pressure of Russia – like Transnistria carved out of Moldova, or Abkhazia and South Ossetia detached from Georgia.

Unlike those puppet States, other entities try and assert themselves thanks to their economic and social dynamism, which gives them enough autonomy to vie for political separation: Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders and Padania (only the first two seem to stand any chance of success). Capital’s amazing worldwide socialising power functions as a force of (dis)integration, building, undoing and recomposing subsets of populations.

If both sides fight each other to a standstill, this war might end with a compromise allowing the Donbas some degree of autonomy, tantamount to a *de facto* independence. Or a Ukrainian counter-offensive might push the invader back to the Russian borders. In either case, all major issues would be left undecided. As for the Ukrainian “Sacred Union” (to borrow a phrase from the French president in 1914), war will have succeeded in “Ukrainising” the population, Russian-speakers included, but not in the south-east: this proves the poor viability of a Ukrainian nation as it exists (or existed) within its 1945 borders.

## **From civil war to imperialist war**

A civil war had been going on in Ukraine since 2014: government forces were fighting separatists, as happens in other countries. As is also the case elsewhere, the Luhansk and Donetsk autonomists were getting outside help (Russian weaponry, and soldiers disguised as “military specialists”). In

distribute political-economic power, and it happened that the State directly appointed an oligarch as governor of a region. The 2004 Orange Revolution did not put an end to it, nor did Maidan in 2014.

There was a prophetic stance in Emmanuel Todd's writing twenty years ago:

"Ukraine has enough cultural differences with Russia to allow it to take on its own identity. But without a social dynamic of its own, Ukraine can only escape Russian control by being pulled into the orbit of another power. The force of America is too far away and too immaterial to serve as a counterweight to Russia. Europe is a real economic force with Germany at its centre, but it is not a military or political force. But if Europe wants to acquire these later dimensions, it is not in its interest to grasp at Ukraine because it will need Russia as a counterbalance to emancipate itself from American control. Here we can take the measure of America's concrete economic nonexistence in the heart of Central Asia. [...] All that America can do is hold up to the illusion of being a financial power by maintaining political and ideological control over the IMF and the World Bank – two institutions, we may note in passing, that Russia can now do without, thanks to its trade surplus... [The United States] was not able to propose a second Marshall Plan, which the countries coming out of communism really needed."

To win its independence, after 14–18, the Ukrainian national movement successfully relied on Germany, on the Entente (the 1918 victors), then in 1920 on Poland. A century later, "Ukraine had long exploited the contradictions between Russia and the West. But, in the end, this proved a dangerous game. Ukraine mattered to Russia more than any other country." (Richard Sakwa)

In 2014, Russia attempted to federalise Ukraine to its advantage: but the annexation of Crimea "did not succeed in mobilising the support of ethnic Russians outside the area directly controlled by the Russian military." (Id.) In 2022, the Kremlin

thought they acted rationally. So did the Nazis in 1939 and 1941. In Indochina, the Domino Theory had its (flawed) rationale. So did the "strategy of terror", whereby the US regularly sought to obtain and maintain a decisive superiority over the USSR, therefore a chance of winning. At the cost of hundreds of millions of deaths, which is the price the States could pay, however horrible it may be.

During the Sino-Japanese war, the nationalist government had the dykes of the Yellow River destroyed to delay the advance of the Japanese troops – objective achieved, and the flood killed about 500,000 Chinese. Probably the greatest war crime in all of history, with the oddity of having been inflicted by an army on its own population.

Twenty-three years later, President Kennedy warned the United Nations assembly about "the terror of mass destruction" and the possibility of a day "when this planet may no longer be inhabitable". Fine words, but since 1961 no nuclear power has given up its weapons. The day any government, democratic or not, will see fit, i.e. reasonable, in its best interest, to kill millions in order "to save" other millions, it will use the bomb.

## **When the nation is incomplete**

Whatever people repeat about a globalisation that supposedly absorbed States and subsumed borders under the domination of a cosmopolitan financial oligarchy and trans-state multinationals, our planet remains structured in State entities. Some function adequately as national States (the American "melting pot" is just one case among many), others do not, and the world-dominating countries belong to the first group. The USA, China, Russia, India are national States, and the European Union's hitherto unresolved weakness is that it is not a national whole – neither federal nor confederal.

A State is a political power capable of imposing its rule on a territory it controls. What is specific about a *national* State is its ability “to bring and hold together components that are often very diverse in language, origin, or religion, and it does so thanks to the possibility of a self-centred development on a territory it manages militarily but also fiscally. [...] The nation presupposes a modern creation, the individual, a being freed from ties of birth, and theoretically ‘free’ to become a bourgeois or a proletarian, and it fills the need to link these individuals into a new community when the previous ones have been dislocated. [...] More than individuals, the nation reunites classes [...] thanks to a fluid circulation of capital as well as labour [and] to a relative equalisation between regional levels of productivity. [...] A market cannot achieve this on its own [...]” (*La Nation dans tout son état*)

Because it was not just an exporter of raw materials and an importer of capital, but had a strong competitive agricultural and industrial basis, the US was able to integrate successive waves of immigrants, and to turn the vast territories snatched from Mexico after the 1845–47 war into six new states. The capacity to play its part on the world market, and soon a leading part, enabled the US to draw its population into *a whole* and make diverse groups belong to the “United States of America”, beyond birth, ethnic and religious differences. The Spanish speaker is not just a “Latino”, he is also – and often first and foremost – an American.

This *whole* was never totally *inclusive*, as proved by the fate of Native Americans, anti-immigrant nativism, Asian Exclusion Acts, Jewish quotas in elite universities, continuing discrimination against Blacks... Capitalist society’s problem is not to achieve racial (or social or political) equality, it is to manage racial inequality, whatever the costs (63 people killed during the 1992 L.A. riots). Despite its persistent deep fractures, the US functions as a nation cohesive enough to remain the world’s greatest power – so far.

ence of the victors of 14–18, France in particular. In 1920, with the support of part of the local population, Poland invaded Ukrainian territory, hoping to create a buffer-country to protect itself from Russia. Poland failed but annexed the western regions of Ukraine (hence Bandera’s anti-Polish armed activities), and parts of Lithuania and Belarus.

In 1945, the Polish border was moved to the west, causing the displacement of millions of people: Poles residing in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania were relocated to a Poland that had just been granted eastern Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia, while ethnic Germans living in those areas were moved to a new and smaller Germany. One of the objectives was to reshape States with a homogeneous population: “all countries are built on national and not multinational principles”, declared Gomulka, the leader of this new Poland, in May 1945.

Federated with the USSR, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic provided one third of the Union’s industrial production, but its economy remained too dependent on Russia for a self-centred development capable of promoting the social and political unity of the country. With the USSR gone, the majority of Ukrainian citizens have a good command of the Russian language, and millions of them work and live in Russia. But if, in the Donbas, a few million inhabitants call themselves “Russians” – unlike those from Kiev – and if Russia has been able to manipulate a separatist “ethno-nationalism”, it is because this region and its population have only been very partially integrated into the rest of Ukraine.

National incompleteness is reflected in political life. The famous Russian “oligarchs” have their equivalent in Ukraine. A “Gas Princess”, Yulia Tymochenko, used to be prime minister, and a “Chocolate King”, Petro Porochenko, president of the republic. Ukrainian parliamentarianism compares poorly with Western European standards. While Ukraine has an important military industry and an exporting agricultural sector, monopolies, sometimes reinforced by media empires, dispute and re-



21<sup>st</sup> century Ukraine is not the only very recent State reality in the region. Before 1914, few thought there existed a Belorussian people justifying the creation of an independent country, and in Vilnius, capital of present-day Lithuania, barely a few percent of inhabitants spoke Lithuanian. Transcarpathia, Galicia (ex-Austrian) in the west, Crimea in the south... the components of Ukraine kept varying over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, what we call Russia today, and also Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Hungary and Rumania have all experienced shifting borders since 1917 (not to mention Czechoslovakia, born in 1918, cut into three parts from 1938 to 1945, then split into two sovereign States in 1992; and defunct Yugoslavia).

Besides, the countries that emerged from the Russian and Ottoman empires suffer not only from their exterior borders being challenged, but also, if not more so, from what could be called *interior* partitions.

The capitalist mode of production brings together and unifies populations where the wage relation, the circulation of labour and capital, and an endogenous development make it possible. In countries like France, Britain, the United States, different languages and religions coexist. Spanish is the mother tongue of 40 million US citizens out of 330 million, and they profess a Catholic faith in a mainly Protestant country, without giving rise to a divisive “ethno-confessionalism”, because American society manages to integrate most of its population (not all, far from it) in the wage labour/capital relationship. In contrast, for lack of these conditions in the Eastern European nations born after 1914–18, “national minorities” (often very large ones) were a destructive issue in the inter-war period, and despite post 1945 population transfers, some “minorities” still pose a problem to this day.

We will not sum up the episodes, after 1918, opposing Bolsheviks, White Russians, Poles, and various parties, armies (including Makhno’s anarchist peasant army) and regions in what is today Ukraine, under the influence and sometimes interfer-

Where such a socio-economic unification of the country, and therefore its political pacification, are impossible or unfinished, the developmental gaps between regions lead to some of them breaking away from central government.

Countries born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of regions successively detached from the Ottoman empire experienced permanent instability, notably Greece and Serbia. These incomplete nations were caught up in the game of powers stronger than themselves. Great Britain, fearing that independent new Slavic States would reinforce Russia, allied with France and Turkey against Russia in the Crimean War (1853–56: Crimea was, and remains today, a peninsula of strategic importance for the Russian navy).

In the East and in the Balkans, “minorities” posed an everlasting problem. On February 22, 1882, Engels wrote to Bernstein : “The Serbs are divided into three denominations. [...] Where these people are concerned, religion actually counts for more than nationality, and it is the aim of each denomination to predominate. So long as there’s no cultural advance such as would at any rate make tolerance possible, a Greater Serbia would only spell civil war.” The Austrian annexation in 1909 of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a million Serbs lived, fostered an opposition between the Austro-Hungarian empire and Serbia – an explosive situation which sparked 1914, and which reappeared at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Yugoslavia broke up.

The emergence of “nationalities” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and of national liberation movements in the 20<sup>th</sup>, was a historical novelty on a world scale. But the creation of a national whole is only possible where there exists a relatively homogeneous and coherent capitalist development: otherwise, “religion [or any other identity criterion, G.D.] counts for more than nationality”.

Not only do most new States suffer disunity, but as Wilhelm II ironically remarked in 1913 to the Belgian king, it often is necessary for a small country to take sides.

Evidently a risky game. Independence is usually acquired with outside help from a great power, and guaranteed by another great power that might well be a rival of the first. In 1948, the nascent Israeli nation benefited from Czech arms delivered in agreement with the USSR seeking to weaken British influence in the Middle East. Then Israel turned towards Western support. The same with Egypt, armed by one camp and later another. Armenia finds itself today in a reversed situation compared to Ukraine: Russia happens to play the protector of a little landlocked country against a much larger and richer neighbour (Azerbaijan)... for the moment, anyway. The Kurds relied on the US in their fight against Daesh, but what will become of Rojava if Americans give priority to Turkey, NATO's stalwart in the region? The protection of a "small" country by a "big" one is no long-term guarantee of security.

In any event, the "aggressor/aggressed" distinction indicates the place where a conflict breaks out, not its cause, logic or unfolding.

"There are so many economic, financial, political and military aspects that determine the internal and external policy of a State – especially if it is located in a geopolitical zone of great importance in inter-imperialist rivalries, such as Eastern Europe – that it is obliged to sell its 'independence', and thus its territory, economy, and government, to one of the imperialist poles that can best promote its national interests or, at least, protect it from the lusts of enemy countries." (International Communist Party, February 24, 2022)

## What is a "Ukrainian" ? What is a "Russian" ?

In 2021, Putin signed an essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, purporting to demonstrate that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. [...] For we are one people." Propaganda masquerading as history... but the past keeps being rewritten by the present, and by all the powers that be.

"Our history is different", a Ukrainian said to explain why his compatriots were pulling down statues of Lenin while at the same time portraits of Stepan Bandera are to be seen everywhere. For many Ukrainians, the Bolshevik leader is easily made into a symbol of murderous foreign oppression. Conversely, whatever his responsibility for the deaths of many Jews and Poles, the militant nationalist can be presented as the embodiment of Ukrainian aspirations to freedom. Born in 1909, Bandera typically represents the turns and reversals inherent in any national movement. Leader of an anti-Polish armed underground in the 30s, then during the Second World War alternately allied with, and afterwards opposed to the Germans who imprisoned him in 1941 because they did not care for an independent Ukraine, he later turned against them, then fought the Russians, and after 1945 collaborated with the German and British secret services which until 1950 helped maintain anti-government guerilla groups inside Ukraine. Bandera died in 1959, very likely assassinated by the KGB. First an adept of ethnic nationalism with more than a touch of anti-Semitism, he ended up a social-democrat of sorts. Fluctuating ideologies fueled his search for allies, compatible or not : nationalism makes the most of whatever support it can get, then looks for an alternative backer, sometimes successfully, often ultimately at its own expense.