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Deserting the War

Sandro Mezzadra

Translated by Kelly Mulvaney

The war in Ukraine, with its devastating effects visible to the whole world, is without doubt a European war. Even if notions of "Eurasia" — as held, for example, by Aleksandr Dugin, a "conservative revolutionary" of the new right whose influence is growing within the establishment around Vladimir Putin — depict Russia as an autonomous cultural and "geopolitical" space, the country remains an integral part of Europe. But this is the case in a particular way: according to a well-known historiographic argument, Russia has been integral to Europe's "self-image" ever since the eighteenth century; that is, the definition of Europe has relied on Russia as a kind of mirror, as a liminal space simultaneously interior and exterior to its own development. In a certain way even the October Revolution was born in this liminal space: the Bolsheviks looked westward, even as they were aware of the particularities of the Russian situation and pushed eastward by the imperatives of promoting anticolonial insurrection. Be that as it may, Russia's position constitutes an element of *virtuality* for Europe, a call to maintain an openness in its definition of itself — concretely, that is, openness regarding Europe's own borders and the mechanics of force that determine its politics. It is this moment of virtuality that Putin's war is attempting to destroy. *And that is a first reason to absolutely resist this war.*

But to the observation that the war in Ukraine is a European war, it is necessary to add that it is *not only* a European war. On the contrary: what is at stake today is nothing more and nothing less than the "world order". To be sure, there is little order in the world. If the design of multilateral and at once imperial architectures in the 1990s rested on widespread confidence that a "new American century" was underway, the attempt of the United States in the following decade — after September 11, 2001 — to support its own unilaterialism with a "global war on terror" was undermined by military stalemates (and then defeat) in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other hand, the financial crisis of 2007/2008 was a deep blow to the economic might of the United States as well as its global reach, and it simultaneously accelerated the rise of China and the latter's transformation from the "factory of the world" to a potential leading power in the areas of digital technology, "knowledge-based economy", and artificial intelligence. The giant trade and infrastructure project known as the "New Silk Road" or "Belt and Road Initiative", which has been underway since 2013 but was longer in preparation, is in this sense an extension of that internal transformation — a specifically Chinese project of globalization. (It is no coincidence that President Xi Jinping consistently portrays and defends the initiative in "multilateral" terms.) In this context, the crisis of the global hegemony of the United States — as world-systems theorists started describing it in the 1990s — has become the underlying theme of various global scenarios, spreading war and instability. Talk of "centrifugal" or "conflictural multipolarity" in recent years is an attempt to grasp the basic characteristics of this critical juncture.

Where does Russia stand in these developments? In brief, the real originary accumulation[1] that took place following the reckless

neoliberal reforms under Boris Yeltsin provided a foundation for a peculiar kind of "political capitalism" to gradually take shape. This means that political power grants and guarantees monopolistic rents (primarily from raw materials) to a relatively small circle of economic actors, who in this sense really can be called "oligarchs", while part of the rent is channeled to the population with view to popular consensus. At the same time, this specific form of political capitalism (which is by no means particularly dynamic or innovative) generates a similarly peculiar form of military expansionism, which has been observable in recent years not only in the wars and interventions along Russia's borders, but also in Syria, Libya, and the Sahel (including in the operations of the private military company known as the "Wagner Group"). This aspect is key to understanding the war in Ukraine (*and is a second reason to oppose it with all means necessary*). That is, the "political capitalism" that took shape during the Putin years has consolidated and expanded in necessarily enlarged areas, while many of the "oligarchs" have extended the scope of their operations globally, leading to objective tensions with the strategies of the Russian president, and ultimately are acting less and less as "oligarchs" and becoming instead more like capitalist actors along the lines of Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk. This results, for one, in hard contradictions with other capitalist interests of various kinds within the Russian domestic sphere, which undoubtedly are part of the backdrop of the events of the past weeks. But on the other hand, the conflict is necessarily global: a special role here is played by China, which is, as it were, connected to Russia in multiple ways, but follows an entirely different strategy when it comes to outwardly projecting its economic might and managing international relationships.

A further point must be mentioned here. The pandemic afforded yet another welcome occasion to celebrate "the end of

globalization". While this is not the place to discuss this claim at length, it can be remarked that the war emphatically makes clear the extent and scope of *interdependence* at the global level. We need only think of the markets for raw materials (grains, energy sources, minerals, etc.), which are organized and fully financialized on the basis of medium and long-term contracts, making it practically impossible to turn resources bound for external trade towards other, domestic uses. The 30% increase in the price of flour in Argentina, one of the most important wheat producers worldwide, can serve as a paradigmatic example. This is the context in which the question of economic and financial sanctions against Russia becomes relevant: on the one hand because of the consequences of the sanctions on the countries implementing them (and the resulting differences within the West, especially with regard to the energy sector); on the other hand due to the boost that could be given — unintentionally, of course — to ongoing processes of "de-dollarization" (with the consolidation of an alternative currency pole around the renminbi) and the development of a bank payment system (such as the Chinese Cips) that could pose as an alternative to Swift. It is not difficult to recognize that China has a central position in this sense as well, even if the country acts very reservedly when it comes to the topic of decoupling from the economic and financial systems of the West (especially with forethought to its own interests in Europe). In any case, China is objectively in a position to play a leading role in ending the war. Whether it decides to do so is another matter.

If up to now my attempt to name various significant aspects for an analysis of the war has focused primarily on political forces and economic mechanisms in particular, it is now necessary to examine another perspective, a topic by no means limited to the "superstructure". A study of ideology, politics and the left in post-

Soviet Russia (recently published in English translation as *Dissidents among Dissidents* by Verso) by Ilja Budrajtskis begins with a chapter titled "Putin Lives in the World that Huntington Built" — an obvious reference to Samuel P. Huntington and his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Recall Huntington's basic motif: after the end of real socialism, the line of conflict at the global level would be defined by a "clash of civilizations" (in which religions would become particularly important). Budraitskis' argument can be understood in this context: Huntington's book may appear today to have had foresight, but not because of any particular analytic strength — rather, because it was a kind of political and ideological manifesto taken up and put into practice by influential actors from George Bush to Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi. Front and center among these actors is Putin, who Budraitskis characterizes as "Huntington's star pupil". The specific identity politics promoted by Putin, with its obsessive recourse to traditional family structures, religion and "values" as bastions of stability and order, aims at its core to define and establish a mythological form of Russian "civilization". This kind of ideological construction is a key element of Putin's politics and in Russia's dominant class. The demonization of homosexuality and feminism and the literal upholding of patriarchy is expressed, unsurprisingly, in the words of the Muscovite patriarch Kyrill, according to whom the fight in Ukraine is directed against "the gays". It is evident that *a third reason to oppose Putin's war*, and especially to support women and men in Russia (and to say it again, with all means necessary) who are fighting against him and his "civilization" is present here. Of course, something remains to be said here, a phenomenon that Budraitskis also refers to in his book, which is that the clash of civilizations also creates "mirror images" within Europe and the West. One need only read the

headline article by Federico Rampini in the March 9th edition of *Corriera della Sera* for an excellent demonstration.

More and more voices are emphasizing that the war in Ukraine has unified the West, and that it is now up to the latter to strengthen its own identity. Since I cannot provide an exposition here of the history of the difficult concept of "the West", a few remarks relating to the years following the end of the Cold War will have to suffice. At the beginning of the 1990s, the United States' leadership in the West was unchallenged. The "lonely superpower", as it was commonly known, did not listen to the calls for restraint expressed by some of its diplomats most experienced in Russian relations. (Even George F. Kennan himself, one of the architects of the "containment" strategy of Soviet power, belonged to this group). Instead, the United States, exhilarated by the certainty of a "new American century", set NATO's eastward expansion into motion, which *objectively* resulted in an encirclement of Russia. It would be a long discussion to go into the role played by many Eastern European countries in this process — from the Baltic states to Poland, for whom membership in the European Union was effectively secondary to membership in NATO. But for now, it suffices to highlight the fact that the Eastern expansion of NATO took place under conditions entirely different from the situation today, insofar as the United States was certain of its economic, political, military, cultural and even moral superiority. At the time, the United States contributed to the heightening of tensions with Russia, especially by hindering disarmament negotiations, and it did so at a moment when it would have probably been necessary to consider a new conference on security and cooperation in Europe modeled on the Helsinki conference of 1975. In place of this, NATO has been a steady burden on European autonomy in international policy and an apparatus of the continued

militarization of European countries in the past decades. Now that three reasons why it is necessary to oppose Putin's war with all means have been named, it must be added that *NATO is for us part of the problem and not part of the solution*.

At least since the Korean War, it has been clear that "the West" is no longer limited to the Euro-Atlantic space. The global axis of US politics is commonly understood to have shifted more recently to the Indo-Pacific realm, with the aim of creating a new system of coalitions directed against China — for which there are now acronyms such as AUKUS (an alliance of Australia, Great Britain and the US) and QUAD (led by Australia, India, Japan and the US). In this context it is remarkable, however, that India, in relation to the war in Ukraine, basically took a position in favor of Russia when it abstained from voting on the resolution condemning the war at the United Nations. But this should not be overinterpreted, either: India, whose current president Narendra Modi holds positions that can unquestionably be called Hindu-fascist, has always maintained cooperative relations with Russia, and the "quadrilaterial security dialogue" QUAD has a more informal character and is not a military alliance in the strict sense. The inclusion of India appears, however, to be an important strategic aim of the United States under Joe Biden, who — in contrast to the Trump administration — from the beginning has attempted to (re)construct a West that understands itself as *part* of a system of global relationships. India's stance could be understood as a symptom of a shift in the frame of that strategic order, which becomes significant when countries such as Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are considered (and with regard to the latter two, especially in terms of oil). What can be derived from this is that the West as a global formation is evidently showing signs of fundamental fragility, which — to put it bluntly

— cannot be traced back to emancipatory forces. This factor must be considered when we attend to the aim — an essential one in my option — of creating (anew) a global politics of movements and forces that fight for freedom and equality.

A few concluding remarks on these movements and forces. The struggle against the war is being led today above all by those who are protesting in Russian and Ukrainian streets and thereby risking imprisonment and death. And it is being led by those who are deserting the war, who are refusing its logic and fleeing to places considered safe. But it is also being led by the tens of thousands of people who are taking to the streets in Europe and elsewhere. Of course, there different and often contradictory perspectives are coming together there, from "No to Putin, No to NATO" to "Weapons for the Ukrainian resistance". The latter is not only a slogan of the steel helmet faction in politics and media, of war enthusiasts and military commentators. Even people who are politically close to us have taken this stance, and in the Ukrainian diaspora in Italy (the largest in Europe, with many workers in the care sector and in many other professions) it is the dominant catchphrase. Even if this position is in my opinion unsupportable, this is not a matter of principle: it is a matter of being clear that *everything must be done to prevent the spread of the war*. That spaces for negotiation must be opened and multiplied, and that the antiwar movement can play an important role in this sense, especially through "diplomacy from below", through material assistance and support, by supporting refugees and expanding spaces of encounter. At the same time, it is essential to separate ourselves from the generalities of the catchphrases, which are themselves initially understandable. Of course, we are against Putin and think that NATO is a part of the problem and not part of the solution. But in the turbulent process of a redefinition of

international order and disorder, which is the context of this war, *we must dare to do something more*. Following the giant worldwide protests on February 15, 2003 against the war in Iraq, the *New York Times* called the peace movement (the global movement that had been in Seattle, Porto Alegre and Genoa) the "second world power". At the time, we criticized this designation because it seemed to reduce the significance of the movement to an "opinion". (Benedetto Vecchi, if I remember correctly, wrote about this with his usual clarity.) To be reminded of this today, however, could be a challenge — the challenge of creating a force, a power that is adequate for our "terrible" times. Many of us reflected on this during the pandemic. And now a war has added itself to the pandemic in a practically seamless way. Other problems that require a global politics have not shrunk, either, the climate crisis foremost. The militarization dynamic that has been accelerated by the war is similarly global and will have major effects on fiscal policy in Europe, seeing as the creation of a European army is now on the agenda. *To desert the war* is today a demand of the hour, but practices of desertion can only develop efficacy when they are embedded in a global framework. When they are carried by a *new internationalism*, one that can't be drawn up at a table and could also be called something else, but which connects to the spirit of its historical predecessors. In recent days there were calls from Russia and Ukraine for a "new Zimmerwald", that is, a conference in the vein of the one in Switzerland that convened socialists who opposed the war in September 1915. We don't know if this is an actual concrete call, and surely the situation today is completely different than a century ago. But it is a powerful suggestion, and it deserves to be taken up.

[1] On opting for “original” rather than the canonical “primitive” to translate Marx’s concept *ursprüngliche* accumulation, see Rosalind C. Morris; *Ursprüngliche Akkumulation*: The Secret of an Originary Mistranslation. *boundary 2* 1 August 2016; 43 (3): 29–77.