

War and Peace "Shouldn't Be about Protecting States"

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A feminist perspective on the conflict in Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 24 February, it not only broke the post-war taboo of invading a neighbouring sovereign state, but also helped to break other taboos in the West. As the new war in Europe unfolds, large swatches of the population in Germany and elsewhere have begun supporting the rearmament of nation-states. Cold War-era institutions like NATO are being recast as bulwarks of peace against a rapacious, resurgent Russian imperialism, and politicians on the Left are finding themselves forced to question long-held beliefs about the nature of defence policy.

With the debate over rearmament reaching a fever pitch, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation spoke to Leandra Bias of the swisspeace Institute about what is being ignored in the process and why it makes a feminist perspective on foreign policy all the more important.

As Russia continues its attack on Ukraine, calls for rearmament are emerging in Germany and around Europe. At the same time, many people are increasingly concerned about the prospect of nuclear war. In this heated climate, what can a feminist perspective offer?

The feminist perspective shifts the focus to the human being, to the individual. When we talk about a nuclear arsenal, we talk in abstract numbers — for example, there are supposed to be about 11,000 weapons in the US and Russia. But each one of those weapons would destroy thousands of people. Nothing could be worse than using those weapons, or even discussing their use.

That is what is missing in the news coverage. We generally talk in very military, abstract terms: troop occupations here, bombings there. We glorify self-defence. The fate of civilians is completely obscured, and all of that worries me a lot at the moment.

It especially worries me because rearmament has proven not to protect us. We have been there before, and the world was not any more peaceful then. We do not want to go back there.

However, the current situation is part of a longer process. The West has been rearming since the turn of the millennium. We have let arms agreements expire and have put far too little emphasis on getting back to binding agreements that ensure that countries disarm and control one another, thus ensuring that we live in peace.

An international agreement that completely bans nuclear weapons has been in force for one year now. That includes not only the use itself, but also threatening to do so, testing and developing nuclear weapons. This is actually a major feminist breakthrough.

However, the countries with nuclear weapons have not signed on. That is not okay; these are the very countries on the UN Security Council that are supposed to determine security and peace on this earth. So we see that this is not the solution.

Let's turn our attention to the people affected. What are the concrete consequences of war for gender relations?

Feminism also shows that everyone suffers in war, that no one wins from a war. This is not only about women, even if currently they often flee alone and are exposed to specific dangers, that they have to fear for their loved ones. It is also about the fact that militarism goes hand in hand with nationalism. We know that nation-states are built on a specific gender division: men are supposed to defend, women are supposed to reproduce, everyone is supposed to submit to the nation-state. It is precisely this perspective that is gaining enormous strength again, and individual human rights are becoming secondary.

In this sense, of course, men are also victims: men who become pawns of rulers such as Putin. We hear about Russian soldiers arrested in Ukraine who do not even know why they were sent to a certain town. They were fed propaganda and now they have to lay down their lives or are exposed to an incredible threat and burden, although they had absolutely no say in the decision.

In Ukraine, all males over the age of 18 have been banned from leaving the country. This is against conscientious objection, that is, against the human right to refuse to use force. This is inhumane. We are not born to kill and go after each other.

So the nation-state plays a central organizing role here.

Yes, that also applies when we look at general rearmament. It is also clearly a question of resources: resources are being redistributed to the military industry, away from the care economy. This is a security issue from a feminist perspective, because we always ask the question: what kind of security are we talking about? And for whom?

We do not put state borders or state needs and interests at the centre, but human rights, the basic needs for a peaceful life for everyone. For example, the need to be free from structural discrimination, free from racial profiling, free from domestic or sexual violence.

There are many people who actually live in "peace", but it is a superficial peace. They have no security in their daily lives, but fear all different kinds of violence. As feminists, we understand violence as a continuum. On the one hand, violence exists through weapons in a war, but, on the other hand, violence also exists in one's own home, in one's own community, in protests and in Occupy camps.

Therefore, it is not enough to argue for a peace that only means a ceasefire agreement. Peace must be a much broader concept. If resources are now further withdrawn from the care economy, which has already faced cuts for years, then many people will again lack the means to meet their basic needs. Once again, it will be women who will shoulder the burden. This, in turn, will make it more difficult for them to participate politically because they simply do not have the time or resources to get involved politically while facing this incredible care burden. Once again, this leaves those voices that are already not being heard with even less of a chance of being heard.

This is one of the reasons why UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, Security passed in 2000 aims to increase women's participation in conflict mediation and peace negotiations. Has there been any progress there?

Ukraine is a very intriguing example here. In 2016, in the midst of a war, it enacted a National Action Plan to implement this resolution. The resolution has three pillars: the participation of women in peace processes, protection against gender-based violence, and prevention.

Participation means the inclusion of women in the military — which is unfortunate, from my perspective — but also in all decision-making processes in general. The fact is that in Ukraine, the focus was only on militarization, on recruiting women into the army. This initiative had great success. Today, Ukraine has one of the largest percentages of women in the army of any country in the world. This came at the expense of the care economy, because militarization was coupled with neoliberal austerity policies. At the moment, the care burden in Ukraine is shifting much more to women in private households.

Our partner organization PeaceWomen Across the Globe asked women in the Donbas about their security needs, and it became very clear that these are basic needs, such as a health infrastructure, social security, good schools, good nutrition. These are the basic conditions for a dignified existence. This is precisely the connection between security and care. When armaments are installed, it means a lack of these resources. As a result, political participation becomes more difficult.

What are the resulting policy guidelines?

That is very clear: we will only get out of here if we finally implement what the feminist peace movement has been demanding since 1915 — in the middle of World War I. It has campaigned for disarmament and for political participation. The major UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and the Platform for Action that came out of it also aim precisely at this. We will only find peace for everyone if we protect the human rights of all and if we lay down our weapons.

Unfortunately, this has not been heard enough so far. In this respect, we must work to ensure that the interests of all people are incorporated into decision-making, that the civilian population has a say. By that I do not just mean women, but all those who are marginalized, who are not heard, who do not belong to the elite, but who are affected by the decisions made by those who have power and who can take up arms or threaten to do so. An example in relation to nuclear weapons is that they are usually tested in areas where indigenous groups live. If they had a say, then maybe we would have a different security policy.

So, the guideline must be: it shouldn't be about protecting states. This leads us to destruction, to war, to violent defence against migrants, and it does not lead to a more peaceful, dignified life for all. In this sense, we need to strengthen diplomacy and multilateralism.

The Right celebrates Putin not only because he provides the perfect projection surface for the good old order of strong men and values. But also because, thanks to him, there is a unique opportunity to further weaken multilateralism, to dismiss it as soft and naive. The UN has many weaknesses, but we cannot go back to an age when there was no room for diplomacy and dialogue, when the only thing that counted was strength. We need to reform the UN, not decimate it.

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