

Is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Putin?

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Peace is not the absence of war but a virtue born of the strength of the soul.

- Spinoza

The best of the West is outside the West, in young Iranian women who let their hair down and are murdered because of it. The best of Europe is outside Europe, in the young Ukrainians who unfurl their flags.

- Adriano Sofri, October 2022

Upon hearing a verse by Euripides saying, “when I die, may everything burn,” Nero reacted, “may everything burn with me alive! [1]” It was easier for Nero to imagine the end of the world than the end of himself. Faced with the high intensity war unleashed by the Russian dictator against all Ukrainian cities, it is easier for the western left — apart from rare and courageous exceptions — to imagine the end of the world than the end of Putin.

Leftist critics of the Russian war against Ukraine can be divided into three major groups: those who legitimize Russian aggression, those who defend peace, and finally those who follow the playbook of realism in international relations to the letter. The left that defends the Russian [neocolonial war](#) [2] does not hesitate to mobilize anti-imperialist arguments for the worst imperialist war in progress: past American interventions would justify the present Russian intervention. Then there are the different shades of “pacifism” that oppose sending weapons to Ukraine. In the 1980s, pacifists advocated the disarmament of their own nation-states; now, they demand others be disarmed, even those states under the invasion and terror of more powerful states. Third, there is the incredible conversion of a portion of the left to geopolitical realism: western support would have to be avoided because Ukraine would precipitate a confrontation between nuclear powers; that is, supporting those who resist the Russian invasion means supporting the apocalypse.

The common thread among the three groups of western leftism is focusing the critique against the Ukrainian resistance — which is reduced to a non-subject or a depository of colonial prejudices, as they turn it into a silent “small republic” in the anteroom of history [3] — and discreetly blessing Russian aggression in the name of ontological anti-Americanism and fear — usually a mix of both in different proportions.

In the field of anti-imperialist pastiche, even the neo-Leninist alternative between “war and revolution” was proclaimed [4]. A weird revolution that sides with the Russian neocolonial narrative and dismisses the Ukrainian cycle of struggles and uprisings of the last few decades, for example, the Maidan uprising in 2013–14. To invert the logic and place Russia as the lesser evil in relation to the United States, Latin America or the Global South are arbitrarily thrown into the mix. For them,

the United States is indeed the greatest evil compared to Russia. However, none of this explains why Russia would be a lesser evil than the West for the Ukrainians, who are the victims and the main body of resistance in this armed conflict. After the negationist currents of the pandemic, we witness the negationism of anti-Ukrainian pacifists. Only the Ukrainian resistance and populations must bear the “economic consequences of the peace,” inverting the famous Keynesian formula. How can one forget that one of the causes of this war is that Ukrainians were disarmed, having handed over their nuclear arsenal right after the implosion of the USSR, a union in which as one of the republics they participated just as Russia did? Then, we have the phenomenon of those who, stumbling on the rocky path to Damascus, converted to the transcendence of realist theories such as J. Mearsheimer’s [5], thus abandoning the civic religion of the struggles of a people for freedom and democracy, like the Machiavelli of the small Italian republics [6].

The Machiavellian defense of the people in arms, which constitutes its freedom through the agency between the multitude and the prince, becomes the new Hobbesian apology for fear in the service of peace by subjugating the Ukrainians. Such peace is actually the mystified name of normalization of war. This alleged complexity hides a simple affective reality: the passion for the power of State [7] represented by the regime of Vladimir Putin.

In an article published by the New Left Review, Antonio Negri and Nicolas Guilhot [8] wrote that nothing would be more dangerous than mistaking a proxy war between nuclear powers for an asymmetrical conflict against a “terrorist state” in the name of “high ideals” such as “democracy” or “human rights”. From the start, Negri and Guilhot turned the facts into a cloud of confusion. Russian state conduct is indeed that of a terrorist state: in Ukrainian areas, under occupation or not, they bomb, torture, and kill at their own discretion; at the international level, they turn grain, gas, and even refugees into weapons — a terrorist conduct under a genocidal discourse [9]. Based on the revisionism of the Kremlin’s historian-in-chief, Putin’s declared goal is to deny Ukraine the right to exist and its inhabitants to be Ukrainians and exist as Ukrainian citizens, i.e., freed from their former historical metropolis. The de-Nazification” slogan have no other purpose than purging the multicultural and multilingual populations in question of any Ukrainian ethnic, linguistic, and national element. That is why the occupiers are deporting thousands of Ukrainian children: to Russify them. Finally, the conflict is indeed asymmetrical, as it takes place between a nuclearized military state and the more recent Ukrainian one, whose ability to fight back is limited and not equivalent in means and methods, as their resources and weapons were behind what was necessary for self-defense.

Negri and Guilhot corroborate the Putinist propaganda promoting a war between Russia and the “Collective West.” As it turns out, in eight months of war, around 50,000 to 70,000 Russian soldiers and paramilitaries were killed in combat, many of them from the ethnic minorities of the former Russian empire, while NATO did not lose a single fighter. During the first months of war, the Ukrainians had only limited defensive military assistance and survived the frontal assault the best way they could. Once again, the Machiavellian virtù messed with the calculations of realists and pseudo-geopoliticians of all countries. The Ukrainians blocked the initial invasion and won the battle of Kyiv despite the asymmetry and lack of support worthy of NATO. Military and national resistance in Ukraine was and [still is a people’s resistance](#) [10]: a people’s war against an occupying army, as in Vietnam (1950s–70s) or Afghanistan (1979), which also defeated nuclear powers.

Mirroring the neocolonial Putinist propaganda and hiding behind a non-existent Latin America or a sentimentally and culturally relativist Global South [11] only deepens the ethical and political catastrophe into which the Putinist leftists — a majoritarian fraction of the left that thinks about globalization, albeit with the discreet charm of anti-imperialism and world-system theories — have gotten themselves.

As Étienne Balibar [said](#) [12], we need to be on the side of the just war that the Ukrainians are fighting. Ultimately, realism is unrealistic as it cannot grasp the terrain of the unpredictable that the resistance unveils. The astonishing collective gesture of the Ukrainian resistance reopened the theater of globalization beyond the dispute between geopolitical blocks and correlations of forces, even if it only cracked a small gap or provoked a small deviation of trend. But it was a qualitative deviation, a clinamen. The invaders did not expect this, nor did most of the Ukrainian allies, who only after that successful initial defense began to increase military aid, while maintaining many limitations of means and target selection.

In fact, Negri and Guilhot are not afraid of dangerous confusion; what they really fear are dangerous truths. Since their analysis chooses not to sustain the tensions implied in the concrete situation, they must surround themselves with defense mechanisms, like speaking in the name of world peace and the salvation of humanity in the face of nuclear horror (invoked only by the Putinist side as psychological warfare). The effective struggle of those who fight for life, independence and dignity is more feared than the triumph of the intolerable. They do not seem to fear Putin's victory and what it means for Ukrainians and other Eastern Europeans. Nothing could be more obscene than that.

Reaffirming the Ukrainian resistance and all the support it can grab, be it from NATO, the European Union, or from the countries of the Global South, is now a fundamental internationalist task, which keeps igniting our desire for another possible world, as in the struggles of the alter-globalization cycle. This world is already emerging despite the terrible brutalities, sanctioned by the Putinist left, in the fields and cities of Ukraine.

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Footnotes

[1] Suetonius Tranquilius, *The lives of twelve Ceasars*. Book 6: XXXVIII - The Great Fire of Rome. 120 AD.

[2] Yaroslav Trofimov, [Russia's long disdain for ukrainian nationhood](#). The Wall Street Journal, Apr 28, 2022. Taras Bilous, [Self-determination and the war in Ukraine](#). Dissent, May 4, 2022. Taras Bilous, [The war in Ukraine and the Global South](#), The commons.ua, March 13, 2022.

[3] One way to serve as a complementary thread to the war propaganda of the invader side is to reduce the invaded to a minor detail, dealt with in footnotes to the Grand Scheme of Things. An example of what we are talking about: Toni Negri e Sandro Mezzadra. [Join the Global Fight against the Regime of War](#). Transl. Geert Lovik. Network cultures, Aug 9, 2022.

[4] Maurizio Lazzarato in his last book in Italian around the Russian war in Ukraine – *Guerra o rivoluzione; perché la pace non è una alternativa*, DeriveApprodi: Roma, 2022 – is a solemn call against pensiero debole only to to submerge in weak abstractions and intermittent totalizations without any grasp on the reality of the forces involved in the invasion and the resistance to it.

[5] Pacifist pastiche mixes the realism of great powers with the materialism of determined abstraction, two impossible perspectives or methodologies.

[6] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, 1532.

[7] It must be said that the French communists have had a good teacher: Stalin. Stalin is indeed the very one who reintroduced the notion of “advanced” and “backward” peoples into socialist thinking. And if he speaks of the duty of an advanced people (in this case, the Great Russians) to help peoples who are behind to catch up and overcome their delay, I do not know colonialist paternalism to proclaim any other intention.” Aimé Césaire, *Letter to Maurice Thorez*. Oct 1956.

[8] Toni Negri and Nicolas Guilhot, *New Reality?*, Aug 19, 2022. Guilhot is the translator to French of the Negri & Hardt’s second book of the Empire trilogy, called *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin: 2004. Both article’s authors seem to have sidestepped the initial chapter about Simplicius Simplicissimus (p. 3), from the 1668 picaresque novel by Hans Grimmelshausen.

[9] When hopefully the war is over and international investigations are properly conducted (for instance, regarding the several Bucha-like massacres), a deliberation can be made about the genocidal nature of the invasion. That the invaders’ speech is genocidal is indisputable.

[10] Mehri Druckman, [Generation UA: Young Ukrainians are driving the resistance to Russia’s war](#), Atlantic Council, Aug 11, 2022. David Patrikarakos, [Inside the Ukrainian resistance](#), Unherd, Jul 9, 2022.

[11] Edward P. Thompson criticized how western Europeans leftists abstractly appealed to the notion of the Third World refusing to see any constructive side in the struggles in Eastern Europe against the USSR and the satellite regimes (the struggles would be only ‘against’ something). For those, the way out of Cold War bipolarity would always be elsewhere, never on the side of those who rebelled within real socialism in a creative manner. [The ends of Cold War](#). New Left Review n. 182, Aug 1990.

[12] Étienne Balibar, [In the War: Nationalism, Imperialism, Cosmopolitics](#), The Commons.ua, Jun 29, 2022.