

War

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"The beautiful days in Aranjuez are now at an end."

(Friedrich Schiller)

Dear friends,

There is no end to my horror at the war. It is the second war in Europe since 1990 and it is even more terrible than the Yugoslav war that lasted from 1991 to 1995. Small glimmers of hope are demonstrations and actions against the war. They condemn Russia's aggression and are in solidarity with Ukraine.

I read all the left-wing texts I can find and see a great helplessness and above all the attempt of a self-insurance: Many reject the war - but not because Ukraine must be helped, but because war itself is rejected and because NATO is to blame for the war. Some say that NATO has ignored Russia's security interests for years, and that if it hadn't talked about Ukraine joining NATO until the end, and if the Minsk Agreement had been put into effect, then ... And it would be better if Ukraine surrendered quickly, then the bloodshed could be stopped. The others say that this is anyway the war of the USA against Russia, which the USA has been waging for a long time in different places of the world. Others see the development of social justice in the world in danger and see the famines caused by the war between the biggest wheat producers in the world. Yes, and then there are those who point out that NATO, the U.S. and Western countries have fought many wars in the last 30 years and that the current war is really nothing new and this time the war is hitting Europe. So far so good, or bad. But something is different about this war: Unlike all other wars of the last 32 years, Russia is the biggest nuclear power in the world and openly threatens nuclear war.

A word about Ukraine. From 2004 to 2019, I visited the country as an election observer and as a speaker at European seminars. I got to know Lviv, the city where the heritage of the Habsburg period was still visible, Kryvyi Rih and Dnipro, the region of open-pit iron ore mining, iron smelters and heavy industry, Kharkiv, the beautiful city of art and students that had not been destroyed in World War II, yes, and Kiev, the magnificent one, which after independence was long characterized by nouveau riche ostentation and poverty. The country has actually always been bankrupted since independence in 1991 - despite being perhaps the richest country in Europe: rich in iron ore, rare earths and uranium, rich in heavy industry, rich in agricultural treasures and rich in well-educated people. As in other transition countries, after independence the wealth was privatized in a predatory manner in a kind of primitive accumulation, and oligarchs divided the wealth and power among themselves. In 2004, it became obvious that Ukraine was questioning its old allegiance to Russia: its citizens forced a runoff election, in which a Western-oriented alliance won. After that, Russia pulled the gas and oil card and tried to bring Ukraine to its knees, and reform policies ended in strife. Then, in 2010, a Russia-friendly president was elected again, who negotiated the previously agreed association agreement with the EU - mind you, until the last signature, which he then suddenly refused to sign in 2013. The subsequent course of events is well known.

Since I first visited Ukraine in 2004, civil society has developed - with fractures - and the democratization of institutions has made progress. In 2014, the country was still bankrupt. But since 2015, it has developed very slowly, but at least. There was even investment in infrastructure and the country came out of the bankruptcy zone. Since 2015, elections in Ukraine have been organized as secret and free elections with the help of OSCE. The current President Zelenskyy won in 2019 partly because he spoke both Ukrainian and Russian at election rallies, helping to reconcile the language groups. He also promised to end the war in eastern Ukraine - and he, too, failed to do so. This war was often seen as a "frozen conflict" in the West, but it has shaped the reality in the country since 2014. Yes, this included militant militias and the so-called Azov Regiment, which were extreme right-wing, later incorporated into the National Guard, and now also fighting in the war. However, this is a very small problem for Ukraine at the moment but may become relevant once the war is over. My impression in 2018 and 2019 was that there was definitely a willingness among the population to come to terms with the Minsk Agreement and to launch an autonomous status for Lugansk and Donetsk. But not so in politics. No Ukrainian politician dared to initiate the necessary change in the constitution for the Minsk Agreement. But all that is history. What remains is that Ukraine made the mistake of trying to break away from Russia.

Vladimir Putin said in January 2022, when he sent his troops to put down a popular uprising in Kazakhstan, that he would never again accept a colorful revolution in Russia's sphere of influence. Oh yes, he had already proven that together with Lukashenko in Belarus 2020. And now he is executing his will on Ukraine.

What remains of Ukraine, we do not know. The destruction is immense. Millions of people are fleeing, some cities are already destroyed. We also do not know how far this war will extend directly to the West. This war will last a long time because Ukraine is resisting with all its might against colonization by Russia and because it has the massive support of the West. But we can also know that Russia has been committing massive war crimes since February 24. We can know that Russia is likely to become for a long time an existential threat to all countries around it that should dare to try to go their own way. This concerns the former Soviet republics, but it could also concern Poland - because who knows how far back in history Vladimir Putin's historical fanaticism goes. Russia will be treated much like Iran from the West for a long time to come. Already, many younger people, artists and intellectuals are fleeing the country to escape the neo-Stalinist dictatorship. The economic sanctions will lead to slumps. Nevertheless, Russia has alternatives, such as close cooperation with China - this may solve China's resource problems, but it is also not good news, as China's conflict with Taiwan looms on the horizon. India, in turn, wants to benefit from Russia's now freely available cheap resources. And South Africa is not following the West's strategy either. Already there are thoughts of reviving the idea of the BRICs, of creating a common currency and economic area independent of the dollar - a thoroughly interesting prospect for the poorer countries of the global South. This would indeed raise the struggle for world political supremacy to a new level. The grand gestures of the West's punitive actions against Russia could thus fizzle out.

Back to NATO. NATO has made many mistakes - and I still believe that it is itself the mistake. In the negotiations for German unification, the West promised not to expand NATO to the east, but then later no one wanted to remember that. But no matter who made what mistakes in the past: Russia has gone completely off the rails and is not only destroying

Ukraine with all its horrible consequences but is openly threatening World War III (as a Berliner, I know how close the tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad are to us, and again, a war would not take place in Siberia or in the USA, but in Europe). How I learned to love the bomb... (Stanley Kubrick).

And the West is not only sending weapons to Ukraine, West is rearming in a way not seen since the 1970s, especially the European countries: Germany has made a policy change in defense policy. For the first time in history, the country wants "nuclear sharing" and has ordered attack helicopters capable of carrying nuclear missiles; it also wants to install a missile shield. Similarly, NATO's eastern members, especially Poland and the Baltic states. NATO has now permanently installed its "battle groups" in all eastern border countries, the U.S. is sending thousands of soldiers to Middle-East Europe, and they no longer rule out a nuclear first strike. High armament on all sides and constant danger of explosion. The best we can expect is that the iron and nuclear curtain will quickly close and the policy of mutual deterrence will prevent both sides from striking out - but woe to those who get caught between the fronts.

The UN Food Program has already had to reduce its food aid to famine-stricken regions because the price of wheat on the world market has risen sharply due to the war. This existential aid not only affects people around the world affected by war and displacement, it also affects, above all, those whose subsistence is threatened because of droughts and floods caused by climate change. We are in a horror scenario: the climate catastrophe continues unabated, the pandemic is far from over, and now this war, whose immediate effects are incalculable.

This is the reality in which we find ourselves for the foreseeable future - and that is not yet a pessimistic description. So what does this mean for us peaceniks? "Fridays for Future" demonstrate against war and for the rapid end of the use of fossil fuels. The networks against nuclear war call for protest and the weak European left tries to save itself by calling for diplomacy.

Everything that has ever been peace policy since the sixties, the Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt, the Helsinki Final Act, the great demonstrations against the NATO double decision, the nuclear arms reduction treaties, the gift of German unity, the Paris Declaration of 1991, the German peace dividend and our pacifism: everything has been smashed and thrown at our feet. We stand before the shards of our history.

But the situation is different from that at the beginning of the 1980s, at the time of the NATO Double-Track Decision. At that time, there were functioning agreements with the Soviet Union. And who, if not we Germans, knew that the word of the USSR could be relied upon.

Peace policy today cannot consist of demanding unilateral disarmament. I see only one viable path: we must start all over again and, together with the networks against nuclear war, stand up against the destruction of the world. War and high armament are also massive additional and immediate destroyers of the future of our planet. Wouldn't it be time to combine the fight against climate catastrophe with the fight against armament madness?