

FRIENDS OR FIENDS? EUROPE AND WAR

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the historical and conceptual relationship between Europe and war, arguing that violence and armed conflict have played a constitutive role in European political and cultural identity. Drawing on mythology, philosophy, nationalism, colonialism, and modern history, it examines how war shaped the European State, imperial expansion, and national integration. The essay also reflects on the post-war project of European integration as a response to fascism and militarism, while highlighting the persistence of colonial and geopolitical conflicts after 1945. Finally, it considers the war in Ukraine as a possible new “constitutional moment” for the European Union, raising questions about Europe’s contemporary political identity and its enduring connection to war.

Keywords: Europe, war, political philosophy, nationalism, colonialism, European integration, violence, fascism, constitutional moment

I.

It might plausibly be argued that there is a close relationship between Europe as a continent and political and cultural space and the phenomenon of war. Some analytical philosophers might even ask whether it is a “conceptual” relationship. Some clever jurists could *then* come and argue that “the nature of Europe” is war, just as the “nature” of law is coercion. It is known that in Greek mythology, Europa was a young woman kidnapped by a mighty and warlike bull into which the divine Zeus had transformed himself. Europa’s adult life was thus marked by an act of violence, a kidnapping, an act of war. Rome was founded by two brothers of whom one kills the other. And then, to give the city children, there was the kidnapping of the Sabine women, also a military operation. From this violence, the future Romans came to be. In the intense and intelligent essay on fascism *Paura della libertà*, “Fear of Freedom”¹, Carlo Levi identifies the “nature” of European politics in the State, and this figure and practice goes back to the mystery of the bloody sacrifice to the God of the Romans. The city was born from the blood of the conquered, something that we already find in truth in the Bible, when it is in Cain, the murderer par excellence, his forehead marked for his crime, that is traced back the founder of the city.

On the other hand, the first great literary work and the founding poem of European culture, the *Iliad*, is a song about war. Here we celebrate the fatal wrath of the swift-footed Achilles, for whose burial dozens of Trojan prisoners are slain. Ilion is defeated and destroyed, its women raped, then killed or made slaves, and the latter eventually, as in the case of Cassandra, the daughter of Priam and concubine by force of Agamemnon,

¹ See C Levi, *Fear of Freedom* (Adolphe Gourevitch tr) (New York: Columbia University Press 2008)

share the tragic fate of their masters. The wrath of Achilles begins because Agamemnon demands that which belongs to him as King of Achaeans: Hippodameia, also called Briseis, daughter of Briseus, a maiden whose possession the blond Achilles wished only for him. This is just another example of war, massacres, and extreme violence toward women. Hector's child, Astyanax, is slaughtered by Neoptolemus, Achilles' son. Here rule war and submission, and virtue is understood as a force that manifests itself in battle. Heraclitus does not hesitate to proclaim "polemos", war, the father of all that is on earth.

In Plato's ideal structure of social hierarchy, though at the top of it we find "philosophers", to whom the glorious status of kings is lavishly granted, the second-best class is the one of "warriors". The brave professionals of violence are given "power", the executive force of "authority" held by the sapient. "Potestas in bello, auctoritas in philosophia" – so might we rephrase this thesis. At the bottom of society there are the simple folk, the working class, whose fundamental task is toiling to nurture the two superior castes of philosophers and warriors, or guardians. This scheme is then reproduced in Nietzsche's *Antichrist*, where again the warriors assume a pivotal function in the ideal model of society. And such model is later reiterated by Leo Strauss, where Plato's warriors are now replaced by more civilized "gentlemen", but with somehow analogous consequences². Behind this later frame of mind there is, like in Nietzsche's work, a nihilistic despair regarding values. European values – so believe Strauss and his neo-conservative pupils among whom we may remember Paul Wolfowitz – are based on nothing; there is no possible truth in them. War, conflict and violence are the real bedrock of our pretended principles. But this truth is only for Straussian philosophers to sustain; for warriors, gentlemen, and simple folk, we should predicate a normative objectivity whose reality, however, is that of a lie. A noble lie, possibly, that would be instrumental in maintaining war as the prerogative of Western civilization, whose clash with other cultural worlds is theorized as one of its essential contemporary features and missions³.

But the relationship between Europe and war is demonstrable empirically and historically, more than symbolically or intellectually. If you go through the annals of Earth's history, it is true that war can be found everywhere from its origin. Anthropologist Pierre Clastres argued that the so-called primitive societies, such as the Tupi Guarani in the Amazon forest after the discovery of America, owe to war their resistance to starting the story of division into classes and social hierarchies. In this case, war is the factor that prevents the rise of the state, not what constitutes it as Kropotkin and, more recently, David Graeber argued. For Clastres, the violence between tribes, their war, keeps them free of servitude, demanding a permanent mobilization of the chief in terms of economic and physical energy, and possible immolation. He must be absent, because he is always busy fighting outside the village. Clastres' thesis is a kind of theory of the political as determining the dividing line between friend and foe (in the wake perhaps of Carl Schmitt), though in reverse. In the concept of the "political" of the German jurist, politics, paradigmatically the State's hierarchical domination⁴, as the command of a sovereign in essence always absolute, is made possible by war, the opposition between a friend, *Freund*, and an enemy, *Feind*, as a matter of life and death. For Clastres that same "political" (the Duce, the State) is made impossible by the same war dynamics between, *enemy*, and *friend*.

² See L Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1968). In this perspective, "liberalism" is gentlemen's political regime

³ See SP Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996)

⁴ See P Clastres, *Archéologie de la violence: La guerre dans les sociétés primitives* (Paris: Editions de l'Aube 2022), but especially P Clastres, *La société contre L'Etat: Recherches d'anthropologie politique* (Paris: Minuit 2011)

Violence – says the French anthropologist – turned outward would immunize the inside of the community with regard to the authority that embodies and operates that violence. However, if we look at the history of the last two thousand years, we cannot fail to see that Europe is the terrain of permanent military clashes; yet this has not saved it from the “political”, the State. War here is a repeated event, an “eternal return” almost, while in Asia, in China for example, war has been absent for centuries. And it is thus that the image of Europe in European political essays, as a land of warriors and battlegrounds, is thematized.

The European is more virile and bellicose, and strong and good in war, than the Oriental. Machiavelli says it, Montesquieu repeats it. Italy becomes drowsy and decadent, says Machiavelli, because it lacks the military virtues that are well exercised by its French cousins. War is adventure, the desire to do, to surpass oneself, to put oneself in play, even a capacity for sacrifice, what European fascism of the Twentieth century, especially German, called “idealism”, contrasting it with the “materialism” of those for whom the shedding of blood was only horror. *Nichts Neues im Westen*, “All Quiet in the Western Front”, the magnificent pacifist novel by Erich Maria Remarque, is branded by the German nationalist right as “materialistic”, and the film from this trait is banned in the cinemas of the dying Weimar Republic. That ban is another blow to the republic and a victory for emerging fascism. The cultural battle in 1920s Europe is about the interpretation and narrative of the Great War. The sacrifice of lives has been immense and fundamentally useless. But in every city and village, Italian, French and German, a monument is built to the fallen that exudes national pride and exaltation of war. In British churches, the walls are covered with the names of hundreds of fallen youth. The flags of the regiments are hung on the vaults of the church, and do not suggest the failure of violence, but exalt its “idealism”, that is to say, the background of absolute irrationality and obedience to authority that made this kind of mechanical violence possible. This is the Europe of the 1920s. And, though inconceivable then, everything would start again in 1939, this time even bigger.

The modern nation in Europe was forged in war. It begins with revolutionary France in Valmy, in 1793, when an army of beggars and populace defeats the well-trained armies and white uniforms of the aristocratic armies. Goethe, who was present on the aristocratic side, will immediately say that he had seen a “new story” be born. The French nation was certainly born, which then trickled into the rest of Europe, arriving with Napoleon to Moscow. And with war comes Germany and its unification. It is the Franco-Prussian war and its victory by Bismarck that allows the King of Prussia to declare himself Emperor of the Second *Reich* in the hall of mirrors at Versailles.

The story of the unification of Italy is no different, as the result of battles of the Piedmontese army against the Austrians and the romantic military adventure of Garibaldi. The constitutive ideal-typical moment of the European nation is not so much democratic revolution, but war, *whether* it is won (as in the case of France, Italy and Germany), or lost (as in the case of Austria, or Poland, and also for proto-Soviet Russia). And what to say of the United States, whose national identity developed through two bloody wars? The first against the motherland England; the second a civil war, or rather a bloody internal feud between two different conceptions of federalism and citizenship. And the United States is Europe projected into the future, the Europe that got rid of its traditions, the feudalism of the noble caste, but not that of war, which is also practiced in order to enlarge the federal territory. First the natives are exterminated⁵, then a third of Mexico is occupied, and finally war is waged in 1898 against a decaying Spain, which had not yet realised who was at its oceanic borders, an emerging, all-powerful empire of white men.

⁵ Cf. G Chamayou, *Les chasses à l'homme* (Paris: La fabrique 2010) ch 4.

II.

War is also and above all a colonial enterprise. This is clearly revealed by the last European colonial adventure, that of Italy in Ethiopia, which was an extermination war, with gases used lightly against unarmed populations, the air force enjoying bombing in a sky of which it was the absolute master. In Libya, the Bedouins were massacred, hanged with coquette nonchalance by well-dressed colonial officers. And of those two cowardly and murderous enterprises, there is nothing left, not even the language, because neither in Libya nor in Ethiopia do people speak Italian today.

Colonialism, which in the Nineteenth century became imperialism, trained on a large scale to oppression and cruelty, serves as a ground for drills and exercises to armies and policing, which then turn into the practice of authoritarianism and totalitarianism within domestic borders. Hannah Arendt explains it well. In the second part of her great book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it is imperialism which is said to prepare fascism. Indeed, imperialism injects the poison of racism into European culture and tests the techniques of destruction of the opponent that are later generously applied by authoritarian dictatorships in the old continent. The “horror” evoked by Kurtz when facing the slaughtering of African natives as it is told in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* will be mirrored and reiterated in the European Holocaust.

Franco, *Caudillo* “por gracia de Dios”, supreme leader by the grace of God, who massacred the Spanish republic, does so with his colonial army, trained to extreme violence, passing from Africa to the Iberian Peninsula in the summer of 1936, and using the same military techniques employed against the rebel tribes of Morocco and the Sahara⁶. And even after the Second World War, Europe, which had experienced the trauma of Nazism, did not give up on the imperial dream. The Netherlands used the money from the Marshall Plan to maintain control over Indonesia by engaging in an expensive military campaign. England quit India, but did not give up its African colonies, where it continued to wage war after war. Portugal disemboweled Angola and Mozambique until the mid-1970s, fighting against African national liberation movements. But the most striking case is that of France.

After the surrender of June 1940 and four long years of German occupation, France, liberated by the Allies in the summer of 1944, was a conquered country, despite being included in the list of victorious nations against the Third Reich and fascist Italy. It was a country conquered and, in the marrow, humiliated and demoralized. The regime of Vichy was a fascist and anti-Semitic regime⁷: its symbol was the double axe that would later be adopted by *Ordine Nuovo*, the Italian fascist terrorist group manhandling State massacres. That regime of Vichy, a more luxurious French Salò Republic, headed by the senile general Pétain, contributed effectively to the extermination of the Jews in France. The decadent atmosphere of that France is well illustrated in Simenon’s “hard” novel, *Dirty Snow*. Treason, Jews sold to Germans for a few francs and quick robberies of their assets, widespread collaborationism, fascism inoculated to the youth, a bourgeoisie and an army that preferred Hitler to democratic ideals and to defending freedom, equality and brotherhood. It is the France of the last Céline and the “Charlemagne” *Waffen*-SS Division, which is the last patrol of defenders of Hitler’s bunker.

The rediscovered freedom after August 1944, however, does not free France of its colonial ghosts. They want to keep the empire even after the Resistance and the Liberation and the promise of a mature republican state. They want to maintain control of the Suez Canal against the nationalization of Nasser, and so arrive

⁶ Cf. P Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harper 2013)

⁷ Cf. RO Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order (1940–1944)* (New York: Columbia University Press 2001)

the paratroopers of France and Great Britain at the Suez, with Israeli support against republican Egypt. And here, this time, the renewed desire of Empire finds the obstacle of the United States, which imposes on its allies to withdraw and to give up the occupation of the Suez. It was 1956. A year earlier, Indochina had fallen and rebelled against French control, and the Tricolor army had been forced to surrender at Dien-Bien-Phu in an act of supreme weakness. Another surrender after the ignominious one to the Germans in June 1940. But France continues in its imperial dream, with the bloody, evil, cruel war of Algeria. Here villages are massacred, mass torture is inflicted. It's a real blood orgy⁸. It is De Gaulle appointed President by the new constitution of 1958 who ends the massacre. France gives in again. Algeria declares itself an independent republic. By the way, the E.E.C. Treaty of 1957 was supported by France as a possible way out of the Algerian crisis, offering the African colony free movement of goods and a rich commercial future within the European common market.

The wars of the Europeans, in any case, extend well beyond 1945⁹ and somehow contradict all the proclamations of pacification and pacifism that the political class spread with full hands among the rubble of the European nations overwhelmed by the disaster of the Second World War. They promise not to make wars, not to blindly kill each other again. France and Germany must stop being hereditary enemies, so that Europe can rise again and heal its deep wounds.

Reconciliation between these two nations is the primary objective and starting point of the project of European integration. There are at least three versions of this project and three corresponding documents. The first of these is the *Ventotene Manifesto* drafted by Ernesto Rossi and Altiero Spinelli, two anti-fascists, a liberal and a communist, locked up in confinement by the dictatorship. The Manifesto is an indictment against monopolistic and warmongering capitalism as well as against the narrow national and nationalist state. The socialist revolution, which must occur if we want to save the spirit of equality and freedom that animates the anti-fascist struggle, must be combined with the immediate overcoming of the form of the national state. A federal union is therefore the aim of the European labour movement in its various and plural components¹⁰.

We should also remember the speech given by Churchill in the summer of 1946 in Zurich where he advocated a federation of continental European states (England is not yet included, due to its rank as an empire). But the most important document, and one that has a lot of consequences, is the statement by the French Foreign Minister, Schuman, on 9 May 1950. This date was not chosen at random; it is the same date as the end of World War Two five years earlier, marked by the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. European integration is therefore part of the same history as that of fighting fascism and extreme nationalism. It is worth re-reading Schuman's words: "World peace can be safeguarded only by creative efforts, proportionate to the dangers that threaten it. The contribution that an organized and vital Europe can make to civilization is indispensable for the maintenance of peaceful relations. France, which for more than twenty years has been the forerunner of a united Europe, has always had as its main objective the service of peace. Europe was not made: we had war. Europe cannot be built all at once, nor will it be built as a whole; it will be based on concrete achievements which will first and foremost create a de facto solidarity." The union of nations requires the elimination of the secular contrast between France and Germany: the action undertaken must primarily concern France and Germany. It is peace, and the rejection of war,

⁸ Cf. A Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: Viking 1978)

⁹ Cf. T Judt, *Post-War: A History of Europe after 1945* (London: Penguin 2006)

¹⁰ See A Spinelli and E Rossi, *Il Manifesto di Ventotene* (Milan: Mondadori 2006)

which motivates and gives impetus to the process of European integration since the 1950 Treaty of Paris establishing the ECSC, the European Coal and Steel Community. Europeans do not want war, they have had enough of it. They must rebuild a peaceful space of convivence. But in the meantime, France moves the battlefield from Europe to Asia and Africa.

III.

It is as if Europe could not do without war. Nor without gold or financial profit. Gold and war are a permanent feature of modern European history. Greed seems to be its engine. The discovery of America was done with armies in search of gold, and for this, the natives are massacred. It fuelled an obsession with the *Eldorado*, a utopian cornucopia of gold and silver. Of money. David Graeber in *The Dawn of Everything*, questioning the origin of money, links it historically to war¹¹. Money is fought over, and gold is needed to have armies. And the army, at least the way we know it today, or one that is structured in a geometric way, seems to be an entirely European invention, whose pattern then influences the structure and operations of the factory – as Lewis Mumford pointed out¹².

Yet, since 1945 we have been living under the illusion that Europe is a space of peace, a “garden of wonders” – as Josep Borrell, former foreign minister of the European Union reproached us, Europeans. A space of Venus, this pacific Europe, sinuous, sleepy and lascivious, but accommodating and decadent when compared to the Mars-ruled warrior, the competitive sprinting of the United States – as Robert Kagan wanted¹³. But now, with a war inflicted by a neo-imperial Russia upon Ukraine, Europe is waking up from its long pacifist hibernation and once again taking up arms, or at least claiming to. We might be facing a deep change in the self-understanding of Europe itself.

It seems to no longer heed the anti-militarist and anti-authoritarian lesson that Remarque drew from his experience on the Western front, with its unspeakable, useless, senseless suffering, which is the same as what Céline offers us in his intense novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, “Journey to the End of the Night”. The lesson now to be learned should not however resemble that other taken from the First World War by the German nationalist bard, Ernst Jünger, in what he romantically and almost nostalgically calls “steel storms”, *Stahlgewitter*¹⁴. For him, war is an inner formative experience, “innere Erlebnis”, which pulls us beyond the conventionality and forgetfulness of ourselves, our vigour, our immense potentialities of feeling¹⁵. It reveals who we are and builds us in a final work of *Bildung*, education and training, of constitution. In the trench, he believes, the community of combatants is formed as a State entity and finally reveals itself as the purest form of society to sceptics. In the trenches for Lieutenant Sturm, the name is already a whole program (*Sturm* meaning “assault” in German), now the life of the senses was more acute¹⁶. Down there, a new lineage gives birth to a new interpretation of the world, passing through an ancient experience, the one of inflicting death upon humans. The war is a primitive fog of existential possibilities, charged with unexpected, creative developments. Down there, on the battlefield,

¹¹ See D Graeber and D Wengrow, *The Dawn to Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin 2022)

¹² See L Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine (Vol. 1): Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1967)

¹³ See R Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2003)

¹⁴ See E Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern. Aus dem Tagebuch eines Stoßtruppführers* 46th edn (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2008)

¹⁵ See E Jünger, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn 1922)

¹⁶ See E Jünger, *Sturm* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1979)

he says, they are not just an organ of the State, one of its agencies, the army, but rather project themselves as the State as a whole, as the hard core of the native communion¹⁷. This is a radical celebration of armed conflict, one that was born in the civilized Europe of the Twentieth century.

Now, war has always been at the centre of the political theory of the West. At least four main conceptualizations can be found. First, there is the war lived and thought as the “plague”, an apocalyptic event, the “red horse” of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. It is a punishment of the innate evil of human beings and at the same time a maximum expression of it. It is like an epidemic as a retribution for an hidden guilt, an event that escapes any control of rationality. It is indeed the highest expression of the sleep of human reason. It may seem to us completely senseless, pure *ananke*, tragic fate, meaningless, but in some ways blaspheming, enrolling in a very high providential design of the divinity that governs the world. With war, the Lord punishes and decides the destiny of human beings who cannot escape from original sin.

The other doctrine is that of war as a “mission”, a teleological or functionalist theory. Here, war is like a strong wind that keeps the air of society alive and reactive. “One would be giving up the great life [*das grosse Leben*], should one be rejecting war” – this is Nietzsche’s view¹⁸. Here, war is an existential moment of human history and its end, and at the same time, one of its basic means. A step towards the epiphany of human destiny. Still a manifestation of the Antichrist, it is victory over this. It is an event that takes place in the space of a specific and historical final rationality. The “history of the world”, *Weltgeschichte*, the space of war, is the “court of the world”, *Weltgericht*, says Hegel. On the other hand, the God of the Old Testament is the Lord of armies, and it is through war on other nations, which are sometimes to be exterminated, that His people confirm themselves as the elect. Moses, coming down from the mountain that saw him talking with the Almighty and finding among His people many who had sacrificed to the Golden Calf, did not hesitate to decree the slaughter of the sinful. “*Ecce homo*,” Nietzsche tells us, basically means “here is the fiend”.

But there is a less dramatic conception of war. No eschatology here. It is a game of politics as an instrumental and in some ways neutral dimension. It is the continuation of earthly politics through other means, says General Von Clausewitz. It is a game of chess for the domination of man over man, or for the preservation of his living space. War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will, he writes. However, it escapes the judgment of morality, although its imperative character might remind us of law as the sovereign’s command. Somehow, in this perspective, war is law issued to the enemy, to the foreign subjects that threaten policies taken within the State precinct, though naturally reaching beyond it. There is a normative dimension of war independent from any other normativity, whether moral or legal. Only prudential calculation is appropriate for it. It is an event that takes place in the space governed by instrumental rationality. Its ends are not subject to the ethics of value, only to that of responsibility which governs the political man. And that, in substance, depends on the authenticity with which this responsibility is assumed.¹⁹

Finally, there is the theory of war as a sword of justice. *Justum bellum*: correct only as self-defence or as prevention of an unjust evil. He must obey a just cause. Vitoria and the Spanish Second Scholastic are peremptory on it. It is an event that takes place within the space of moral rationality, or else juridical, as

¹⁷ See E Jünger, *Sturm* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1979). See also E Jünger, *Feuer und Blut. Ein kleiner Ausschnitt einer grossen Schlacht* (Magdeburg: Stahlheim-Verlag 1925)

¹⁸ F Nietzsche, *Götzendämmerung, oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1985) 35. Translation mine.

¹⁹ Cf. WB Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978), chapter three.

in the case of the legalization of war as a sanction of international law according to the doctrine of Hans Kelsen²⁰.

But there is a fifth concept, which has already been mentioned, never specifically elaborated, but more or less explicit in more or less liberal nationalism. It is about war as a “constitutional moment”, as a founding fact of a community. The foundation of the constitutional order, as the production of the political order. Now, it is this last concept that is being felt again, even if in an ambiguous way, in the current affair of the war in Ukraine. The European Union, which in the past had conceived itself as an order that prevents war and flees from it, now seems to interpret the Ukrainian war as an event that might give it the ambitioned but so far essentially absent legitimacy as a political order proper and sovereign. This war might be somehow shaped as its “constitutional moment”. In supporting the war against Russia, it is Europe that tests its unity and determination. The Russians invading Ukraine are attacking our values, and the future of a federal Europe capable of autonomous geopolitical strategy. However, with war, Europe becomes part of the world’s powers, says the still constitutionally underdeveloped European Union. It acquires the longed-for supranational material constitution. Or so it might be claimed²¹. But were European integration and federation not originally thought and planned as instituting durable, possibly “eternal”, peace in the old continent? *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*.

²⁰ See, for instance, H Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1949) 328 ff.

²¹ Cf. M Flammini, ‘L'altra Europa. La guerra in Ucraina e la forza dell'unità’ in *Esiste una guerra giusta?* (Turin: U.T.E.T 2023) 73 ff.