

The Statesman

A culture of war from the Soviets to Russia

The escalating violence of the Nazi-Fascist front in the 1930s brought the outbreak of the Second World War and created an even more nefarious scenario than the one that destroyed Europe between 1914 and 1918.

MARCELLO MUSTO | May 9, 2022 9:23 am



The escalating violence of the Nazi-Fascist front in the 1930s brought the outbreak of the Second World War and created an even more nefarious scenario than the one that destroyed Europe between 1914 and 1918. After Hitler's troops attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Joseph Stalin called for a Great Patriotic War that ended on May 9 with the defeat of Germany, Italy and Japan. This date became such a central element in Russian national unity that it survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and has lasted until our own days. Under the guise of the fight against Nazism, a dangerous ideology of nationalism and militarism is hidden – today more than ever.

With the post-war division of the world into two blocs, the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) decided that the main task of the international Communist movement was to safeguard the existence of the Soviet Union. In the same period, the Truman Doctrine marked the advent of a new type of war: the Cold War. In its support of anti-communist forces in Greece, in the Marshall Plan (1948) and the creation of Nato

(1949), the United States of America contributed to avoiding the advance of progressive forces in Western Europe. The Soviet Union responded with the Warsaw Pact (1955). This configuration led to a huge arms race, which, despite the fresh memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, also involved a proliferation of nuclear bomb tests.

With a political turn decided by Nikita Khrushchev in 1961, the Soviet Union began a period of “peaceful coexistence”. This change, with its emphasis on non-interference and respect for national sovereignty, as well as economic cooperation with capitalist countries, was supposed to avert the danger of a third world war (which the Cuban missiles crisis showed to be a possibility in 1962) and to support the argument that war was not inevitable. However, this attempt at constructive cooperation was full of contradictions.

In 1956, the Soviet Union had already violently crushed a revolt in Hungary. The Communist parties of Western Europe had not condemned but justified the military intervention in the name of protecting the socialist bloc and Palmiro Togliatti, the secretary of the Italian Communist Party, declared: “We stand with our own side even when it makes a mistake”. Most of those who shared this position regretted it bitterly in later years when they understood the devastating effects of the Soviet operation.

Similar events took place at the height of peaceful coexistence, in 1968, in Czechoslovakia. The Politburo of the CPSU sent in half a million soldiers and thousands of tanks to suppress the demands for democratization of the “Prague Spring”. This time critics on the Left were more forthcoming and even represented the majority. Nevertheless, although disapproval of the Soviet action was expressed not only by New Left movements but by a majority of Communist parties,

including the Chinese, the Russians did not pull back but carried through a process that they called “normalization”. The Soviet Union continued to earmark a sizable part of its economic resources for military spending, and this helped to reinforce an authoritarian culture in society. In this way, it lost forever the goodwill of the peace movement, which had become even larger through the extraordinary mobilizations against the war in Vietnam.

One of the most important wars in the next decade began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1979, the Red Army again became a major instrument of Russian foreign policy, which continued to claim the right to intervene in “their security zone”. The ill-starred decision turned into an exhausting adventure that stretched over more than ten years, causing a huge number of deaths and creating millions of refugees. On this occasion, the international Communist movement was much less reticent than it had been in relation to previous Soviet invasions. Yet this new war revealed even more clearly to international public opinion the split between “actually existing socialism” and a political alternative based on peace and opposition to militarism.

Taken as a whole, these military interventions worked against a general arms reduction and served to discredit socialism. The Soviet Union was increasingly seen as an imperial power acting in ways, not unlike those of the United States, which, since the onset of the Cold War, had more or less secretly backed coups d'état and helped to overthrow democratically elected governments in more than twenty countries around the world.

Lastly, the “socialist wars” in 1977-1979 between Cambodia and Vietnam and China and Vietnam, against the backdrop of the Sino- Soviet conflict, dissipated whatever

leverage “Marxist-Leninist” ideology (already remote from the original foundations laid by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels) had in attributing war exclusively to the economic imbalances of capitalism.

Marx did not develop in any of his writings a coherent theory of war, nor did he put forward guidelines for the correct attitude to be taken towards it. However, when he chose between opposing camps, his only constant was his opposition to Tsarist Russia, which he saw as the outpost of counter-revolution and one of the main barriers to working-class emancipation.

In *Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century* – a book published by Marx in 1857 but never translated into the Soviet Union –, speaking of Ivan III, the aggressive Muscovite monarch of the fifteenth century who unified Russia and laid the ground for its autocracy, he stated: “one merely needs to replace one series of names and dates with others and it becomes clear that the policies of Ivan III, and those of Russia today, are not merely similar but identical”. Unfortunately, these observations seem as if written for today, in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Wars disseminate an ideology of violence, often combined with the nationalist sentiments that have torn the workers’ movement apart. Rarely favouring practices of democracy, they instead increase the power of authoritarian institutions. Wars swell the military, bureaucratic and police apparatus. They lead to the effacement of society before state bureaucracy. In *Reflections on War*, the philosopher Simone Weil argued that: “no matter what name it may take – fascism, democracy, or dictatorship of the proletariat – the principal enemy remains the administrative, police, and military apparatus; not the enemy across the border, who is our enemy only to the extent that they are our brothers and sisters’ enemy, but the one who claims to be our defender while making us its slaves”. This is a dramatic lesson that the Left should never forget.