

# How Will Russia's War on Ukraine End?

AN INTERVIEW WITH

ÉTIENNE BALIBAR / SILVIA FEDERICI / MICHAEL LÖWY

The war in Ukraine is now in its fourth month and there is no end in sight. In this wide-ranging discussion, Silvia Federici, Michael Löwy, and Étienne Balibar discuss the war and what it might take to bring it to an end.

**INTERVIEW BY**

MARCELLO MUSTO

The war in Ukraine is now in its fourth month. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, it has already caused the death of almost five thousand civilians and has forced almost five million people to leave their homes and flee abroad. These numbers do not include military deaths — at least ten thousand Ukrainians and probably more on the Russian side — and the many millions of people who have been displaced inside Ukraine.

The invasion has also entailed the mass destruction of cities and civilian infrastructure that will take generations to rebuild. The extent of major war crimes, like those committed during the siege of Mariupol, are yet to fully come to light.

Reflecting on the war so far, Marcello Musto sat down with Étienne Balibar, Silvia Federici, and Michael Löwy. Together, they discussed Russia's culpability, the role of NATO, and paths toward ending the war.

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**MARCELLO MUSTO**                    The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought the brutality of war back to Europe and confronted the world with the dilemma of how to respond to the attack on Ukrainian sovereignty.

**MICHAEL LÖWY**                    As long as [Vladimir] Putin wanted to protect the Russian-speaking minorities of the Donetsk region, there was a certain rationality to his policies. The same can be said for his opposition to NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. However, this brutal invasion of Ukraine, with its series of bombings of cities, with thousands of civilian victims, among them elderly people and children, has no justification.

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**                The war developing before our eyes is “total.” It is a war of destruction and terror waged by the army of a more powerful neighboring country, whose government wants to enlist it in an imperialist adventure with no turning back. The urgent, immediate imperative is that the Ukrainians' resistance should hold, and that to this end it should be and feel really supported by actions and not simple feelings. What actions? Here begins the tactical debate, the calculation of the efficacy and risks of the “defensive” and the “offensive.” However, “wait and see” is not an option.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**                Alongside the justified Ukrainian resistance, there is the equally critical question of how Europe can avoid being seen as an actor in the war and contribute instead, as much as possible, to a diplomatic initiative to bring an end to the armed conflict. Hence the demand of a significant part of public opinion — despite the bellicose rhetoric of the last three months — that Europe should not take part in the war.

The first point of this is to avoid even more suffering of the population. For the danger is that, already martyred by the Russian army, the nation will be turned into an armed camp that receives weapons from NATO and wages a long war on behalf of those in Washington who hope for a permanent weakening of Russia and a greater economic and military dependence of Europe on the US. If this were to happen, the conflict would go beyond the full and legitimate defense of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Those who, from the beginning, denounced the dangerous spiral of war that would follow shipments of heavy weapons to Ukraine are certainly not unaware of the daily violence perpetrated

there and do not wish to abandon its population to the military might of Russia. “Nonalignment” does not mean neutrality or equidistance, as various instrumental caricatures have suggested. It is not a question of abstract pacifism as a matter of principle, but rather of a concrete diplomatic alternative. This implies carefully weighing up any action or declaration according to whether it brings nearer the key objective in the present situation: that is, to open credible negotiations to restore peace.

**SILVIA FEDERICI**

There is no dilemma. Russia’s war on Ukraine must be condemned. Nothing can justify the destruction of towns, the killing of innocent people, the terror in which thousands are forced to live. Far more than sovereignty has been violated in this act of aggression. However, I agree, we must also condemn the many maneuvers by which the US and NATO have contributed to foment this war, and the decision of the US and the EU to send arms to Ukraine, which will prolong the war indefinitely. Sending arms is particularly objectionable considering that Russia’s invasion could have been stopped, had the US given Russia a guarantee that NATO will not extend to its borders.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

Since the beginning of the war, one of the main points of discussion has been the type of aid to be provided for the Ukrainians to defend themselves against Russia’s aggression, but without generating the conditions that would lead to even greater destruction in Ukraine and an expansion of the conflict internationally. Among the contentious issues in the past months have been [Volodymyr] Zelensky’s request for the imposition of a no-fly zone over Ukraine, the level of economic sanctions to be imposed on Russia, and, more significantly, the appropriateness of sending arms to the Ukrainian government. What are, in your opinion, the decisions that have to be taken to ensure the smallest number of victims in Ukraine and to prevent further escalation?

**MICHAEL LÖWY**

One could level many criticisms at present-day Ukraine: the lack of democracy, the oppression of the Russian-speaking minority, “occidentalism,” and many others. But one cannot deny the Ukrainian people their right to defend themselves against the Russian invasion of their territory in brutal and criminal contempt of the right of nations to self-determination.

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**

I would say that the Ukrainians' war against the Russian invasion is a "just war," in the strong sense of the term. I am well aware that this is a questionable category, and that its long history in the West has not been free from manipulation and hypocrisy, or disastrous illusions, but I see no other suitable term.

I appropriate it, therefore, while specifying that a "just" war is one where it is not enough to recognize the legitimacy of those defending themselves against aggression — the criterion in international law — but where it is necessary to make a commitment to their side. And that it is a war where even those, like me, for whom all war — or all war today, in the present state of the world — is unacceptable or disastrous, do not have the choice of remaining passive. For the consequence of that would be still worse. I therefore feel no enthusiasm, but I choose: against Putin.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

I understand the spirit of these observations, but I would concentrate more on the need to head off a general conflagration and therefore on the urgent need to reach a peace agreement. The longer this takes, the greater are the risks of a further expansion of the war. No one is thinking of looking away and ignoring what is happening in Ukraine. But we have to realize that when a nuclear power like Russia is involved, with no sizable peace movement active there, it is illusory to think that the war against Putin can be "won."

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**

I am terribly afraid of military — including nuclear — escalation. It is terrifying and visibly not ruled out. But pacifism is not an option. The immediate requirement is to help the Ukrainians to resist. Let us not start playing "nonintervention" again. The EU is anyway already involved in the war. Even if it is not sending troops, it is delivering weapons — and I think it is right to do so. That is a form of intervention.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

On May 9, the Biden administration approved the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022: a package of more than forty billion dollars in military and financial aid to Ukraine. It is a colossal sum, to which should be added the aid from various EU countries, and it seems designed to fund a protracted war. Biden himself strengthened this impression on June 15, when he announced that the US would be sending military aid worth a further one billion dollars.

The ever larger supplies of hardware from the US and NATO encourage Zelensky to keep putting off the much-needed talks with the Russian government. Moreover, given the historical precedent of weapons that were originally sent into active war zones but sticking around long after for different ends, it seems reasonable to wonder whether these shipments will serve only to drive the Russian forces from Ukrainian territory.

**SILVIA FEDERICI**

I think that the best move would be for the US and EU to give Russia the guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO. This was promised to [Mikhail] Gorbachev at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, though it was not put in writing. Unfortunately, there is no interest in seeking a solution.

Many in the US military and political power structure have been advocating and preparing for a confrontation with Russia for years. And the war is now conveniently used to justify a huge increase in petroleum extraction and brush aside all concern for global warming. Already Biden has gone back on his electoral campaign promise to stop drilling on Native American lands. We are also witnessing a transfer of billions of dollars to the US military industrial complex, that is one of the main winners in this war. Peace will not come with an escalation in the fighting.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

Let us discuss the reactions of the Left to the Russian invasion. Some organizations, though only a small minority, made a big political mistake in refusing to clearly condemn Russia's "special military operation" — a mistake which, apart from anything else, will make any denunciations of future acts of aggression by NATO, or others, appear less credible. It reflects an ideologically blinkered view that is unable to conceive of politics in anything but a one-dimensional manner, as if all geopolitical questions had to be evaluated solely in terms of attempting to weaken the US.

At the same time, all too many others on the Left have yielded to the temptation to become, directly or indirectly, co-belligerents in this war. I was not surprised by the positions of the Socialist International, the Greens in Germany, or the few progressive representatives of the Democratic Party in the US — although sudden conversions to militarism by people who, just the day before, declared themselves to be pacifists always have a shrill, jarring quality. What I have in mind, rather, are many forces of the so-called "radical" left, who in these weeks have lost any distinct voice amid the pro-Zelensky chorus. I believe that, when they do not oppose war, progressive forces lose an essential part of their reason for existence and end up swallowing the ideology of the opposite camp.

**MICHAEL LÖWY**

It is no coincidence that the great majority of the world's "radical" left parties, including even those most nostalgic for Soviet socialism, such as communist parties of Greece and Chile, have condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Unfortunately, in Latin America, important forces of the Left, and governments such as Venezuela's, have taken the side of Putin, or have limited themselves to a sort of "neutral" stance — like [Luiz Inácio] Lula [da Silva], the leader of the Worker's Party in Brazil. The choice for the Left is between the right of peoples to self-determination — as Lenin argued — and the right of empires to invade and attempt to annex other countries. You cannot have both, for these are irreconcilable options.

**SILVIA FEDERICI**

In the US, spokespersons for social justice movements and feminist organizations like Code Pink have condemned Russia's aggression. It has been noted, however, that the US and NATO's defense of democracy is quite selective, considering their record in Afghanistan, Yemen, Africom's operations in the Sahel. And the list could go on.

The hypocrisy of the US's defense of democracy in Ukraine is also evident when we consider the silence of the American government in the face of Israel's brutal occupation of Palestine and constant destruction of Palestinian lives. It has also been noted that the US has opened its doors to Ukrainians after closing them to immigrants from Latin America, though for many fleeing from their countries was also a matter of life and death.

As for the Left, it is certainly a shame that the institutional left — starting with [Alexandria] Ocasio-Cortez — has supported sending arms to Ukraine. I wish that the radical media were more inquisitive concerning what we are told at the institutional level. For instance, why is "Africa starving" because of the war in Ukraine? What international policies have made African countries dependent on Ukrainian grains? Why not mention the massive land grabs at the hands of international companies, which have led many to speak of a "new scramble for Africa"? I want to ask, once again: Whose lives have value? And why do only certain forms of death arouse indignation?

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

Despite the increased support for NATO following the Russian invasion of Ukraine — demonstrated by the formal request of Finland and Sweden to join this organization — it is necessary to work harder to ensure that public opinion does not see the largest and most aggressive war machine in the world (NATO) as the solution to the problems of global security. In this story, NATO has shown itself yet again to be a dangerous organization, which, in its drive for expansion and unipolar domination, serves to fuel tensions leading to war around the globe. However, there is a paradox. Four months after the beginning of this war, we can certainly say

that Putin not only got his military strategy wrong, but also ended up strengthening — even from the point of view of international consensus — the enemy whose sphere of influence he wanted to limit: NATO.

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**

I am among those who think that NATO should have disappeared at the end of the Cold War, at the same time as the Warsaw Pact. However, NATO had not only external functions but also — perhaps mainly — the function of disciplining, not to say domesticating, the Western camp. All that is certainly linked to an imperialism: NATO is part of the instruments guaranteeing that Europe in the broad sense does not have genuine geopolitical autonomy vis-à-vis the American empire.

It is one of the reasons why NATO was kept after the Cold War. And, I agree, the consequences have been disastrous for the whole world. NATO consolidated several dictatorships in its own sphere of influence. It covered for — or tolerated — all sorts of wars, some of them hideously murderous and involving crimes against humanity. What is happening at the moment because of Russia has not changed my mind about NATO.

**MICHAEL LÖWY**

NATO is an imperialist organization, dominated by the US and responsible for innumerable wars of aggression. The dismantling of this political-military monster, generated by the Cold War, is a fundamental requirement of democracy. Its weakening in recent years has led [Emmanuel] Macron to declare, in 2019, that the Alliance was “brain-dead.”

Unfortunately, Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine has resuscitated NATO. Sweden and Finland have now decided to join it. US troops are stationed in Europe in great numbers. Germany, which two years ago refused to enlarge its military budget despite [Donald] Trump's brutal pressure, has recently decided to invest one hundred billion euros in rearmament. Putin has saved NATO from its slow decline, perhaps disappearance.

**SILVIA FEDERICI**

It is worrisome that Russia's war on Ukraine has produced a great amnesia about NATO's expansionism, and its support of the EU and US imperialist policy. It is time to refresh our memory about NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, its role in Iraq, and its lead in the bombing and disintegration of Libya. Examples of NATO's total and constitutional disregard for the democracy that it now pretends to defend are too many to count. I do not believe that NATO was moribund before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Quite the contrary. Its march through Eastern Europe and its presence in Africa demonstrates the opposite.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

This amnesia seems to have affected many forces of the Left in government. Overturning its historical principles, the parliamentary majority of the Left Alliance in Finland recently voted in favor of joining NATO. In Spain, much of Unidas Podemos joined the chorus of the entire parliamentary spectrum in favor of sending weapons to the Ukrainian army and supported the huge rise in military spending. If a party does not have the courage to speak out loud against such policies, it makes its own contribution to the expansion of US militarism in Europe. Such subaltern political conduct has punished leftist parties many times in the past, including at the polls, as soon as the occasion has arisen.

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**

The best would be for Europe to be strong enough to protect its own territory, and for there to be an effective system of international security – that is, for the UN to be democratically overhauled and freed from the right of veto of the permanent members of the Security Council. But the more NATO rises as a security system, the more the UN declines. In Kosovo, Libya, and, above all in 2013, in Iraq, the aim of the United States and NATO in its wake was to degrade the UN capacities for mediation, regulation, and international justice.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

Let us end on what you think the course of the war will be and what are the possible future scenarios.

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**

One can only be dreadfully pessimistic about the developments to come. I am myself, and I believe that the chances of avoiding disaster are very remote. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, escalation is probable, especially if the resistance to the invasion manages to keep going; and it cannot stop at “conventional” weapons – whose boundary with “weapons of mass destruction” has become very hazy. Second, if the war ends in a “result,” it will be disastrous in every eventuality. Of course, it will be disastrous if Putin achieves his aims by crushing the Ukrainian people and through the encouragement this gives for similar enterprises; or, also, if he is forced to halt and pull back, with a return to bloc politics in which the world will then become frozen.

Either of these outcomes will bring a flare-up of nationalism and hatred that will last a long time. Third, the war, and its sequels, hold back the mobilization of the planet against climate catastrophe – in fact, they help to precipitate it, and too much time has already been wasted.

**MICHAEL LÖWY**

I share these preoccupations, especially concerning the delay in the fight against climate change, which is now totally marginalized by the arms race of all the countries concerned by the war.

**SILVIA FEDERICI**

I too am pessimistic. The US and other NATO countries have no intention of assuring Russia that NATO will not extend its reach to the borders of Russia. Therefore, the war will continue with disastrous consequences for Ukraine, Russia, and beyond. We will see in the coming months how other European countries will be affected. I cannot imagine future scenarios other than the extension of the state of permanent warfare that already is a reality in so many parts of the world and, once more, the diversion of resources much needed to support social reproduction toward destructive ends. It hurts me that we do not have a massive feminist movement going to the streets, going on strike, determined to put an end to all wars.

**MARCELLO MUSTO**

I, too, sense that the war will not stop soon. An “imperfect” but immediate peace would certainly be preferable to the prolonging of hostilities, but too many forces in the field are working for a different outcome. Whenever a head of state pronounces that “we will support Ukraine until it is victorious,” the prospect of negotiations recedes further into the distance. Yet I think it is more likely that we are heading for an indefinite continuation of the war, with Russian troops confronting a Ukrainian army resupplied and indirectly supported by NATO.

The Left should strenuously fight for a diplomatic solution and against increases in military spending, the cost of which will fall on the world of labor and lead to a further economic and social crisis. If this is what is going to happen, the parties that will gain are those on the far right that nowadays are putting their stamp on the European political debate in an ever more aggressive and reactionary manner.

**ÉTIENNE BALIBAR**

To put forward positive perspectives, our goal would have to be a recomposition of Europe, in the interests of the Russians, the Ukrainians, and our own, in such a way that the question of nations and nationalities is completely rethought.

An even more ambitious objective would be to invent and develop a multilingual, multicultural Greater Europe open to the world — instead of making the militarization of the European Union,

inevitable though it may seem in the short term, the meaning of our future. The aim would be to avoid the “clash of civilizations” of which we would otherwise be the epicenter.

**MICHAEL LÖWY**

To propose a more ambitious objective, in positive terms, I would say that we should imagine another Europe and another Russia, rid of their capitalist parasitic oligarchies. [Jean] Jaurès’s maxim “capitalism carries war like the cloud carries the storm” is more relevant than ever. Only in another Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals – postcapitalist, social, and ecological – can peace and justice be assured. Is this a possible scenario? It depends on each of us.

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