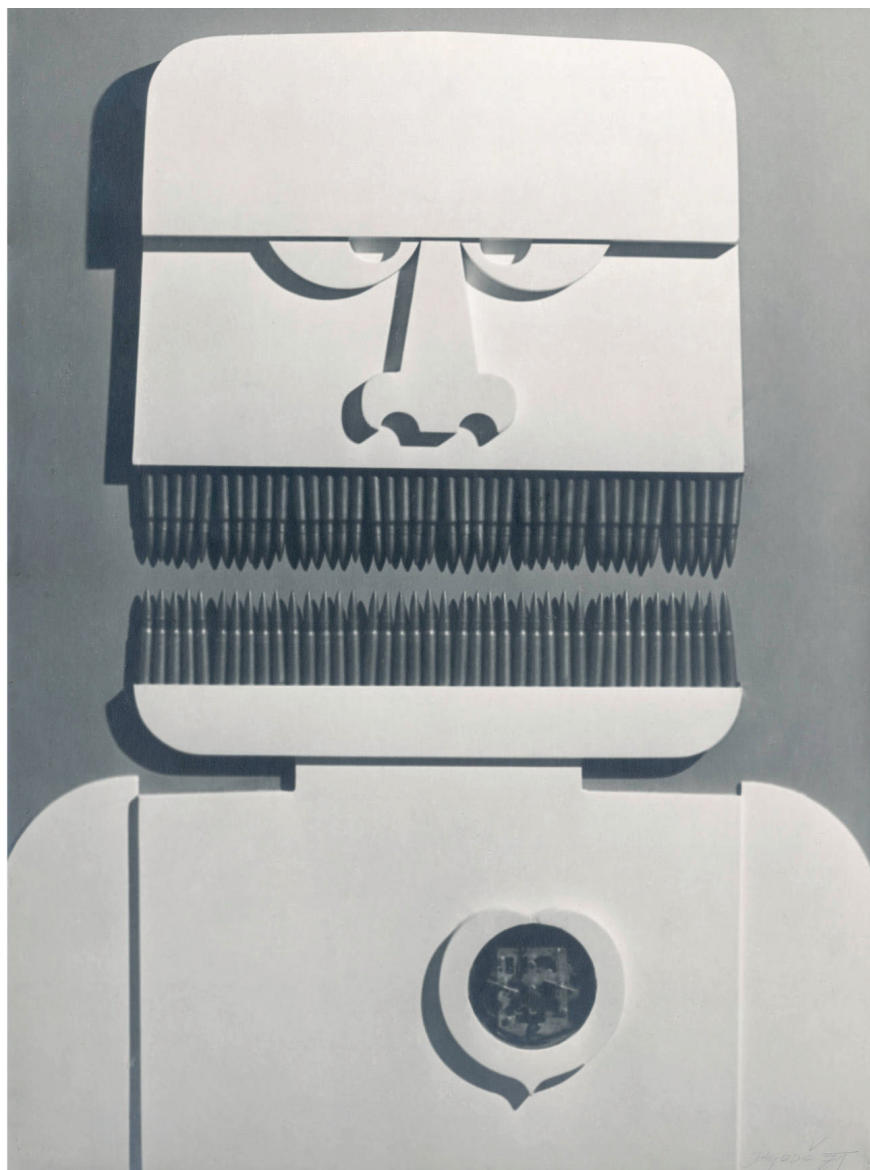


Peace Policies and Practices in Yugoslavia and Beyond



PEACE, UNCONDITIONAL!

Edited by
Sanja Petrović Todosijević and Martin Pogačar

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UNCONDITIONAL!



Institute for Recent History of Serbia
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in Yugoslavia and Beyond

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Sanja Petrović Todosijević and Martin Pogačar

Belgrade, Ljubljana
2025

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Peter Klepec*

On the Cruelty of War**

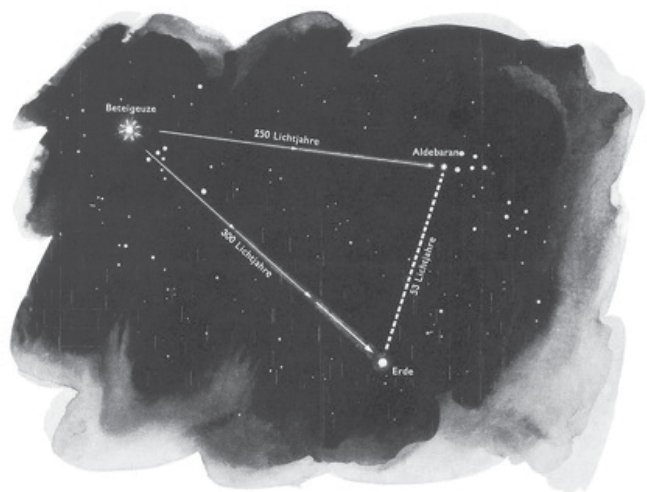
Abstract The chapter explores the ideological shift in the West's perception of war, particularly as it relates to recent conflicts such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war that broke out was described as a "cruel war"; however, this rhetoric of "cruel war" is used selectively, underscoring the hypocrisy in global responses to various conflicts. The text attempts to show from different angles the dimension of the "cruel war" trope in connection to both what war is and what cruelty is. In particular, it highlights the dimensions of denial and disavowal that come to the fore concerning cruelty. In the post-Second World War society, cruelty has been declared an absolute evil. It has become omnipresent, which at the same time enables a hypocritical tolerance towards it. The same applies to war, which should be abolished once and for all precisely because all war is cruel.

Keywords war, cruelty, ideology, violence, international order, Ukraine, denial, disavowal

In this discussion, I intend to position the recent shift in the ideological understanding of war in a specific context. In particular, the Western, especially European, perception of war has changed suddenly and dramatically in the last few years. For decades, war was seen in Europe as a bad thing, so bad that we agreed "never again". The two world wars of the 20th century were extremely violent and cruel, especially in Europe. Therefore, after the Second World War, efforts were intensified to ensure that such a war would not happen again. Although the Cold War divided Europe and was accompanied by extremely cruel proxy

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Stane Jagodič, *Goodbye above the stars!*, photomontage, 1989

wars, such as the Vietnam War, Europe tried in every way to avoid war and to work for peace. A special chapter in this context is the 1990s, with the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the two wars in Chechnya. Whatever the complex relationship of European politics to these wars, the prevailing view, at least in principle, was that war was not an acceptable way of settling international disputes. However, with the recent shift, war has evolved from something condemned to something seemingly “inevitable”, reshaping the international order and challenging post-Second World War ideals prioritizing peace and human rights. Contemporary conflicts reveal a resurgence in the tacit acceptance of brutality as nations and superpowers pursue interests with a degree of sanctioned cruelty. Although we do not want it, war now seems “inevitable” as it has “knocked on our door” in the form of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Ukrainians and, by extension, Europeans through the involvement of the European Union (EU), have once again in (our) history been forced to face the reality of war, to live the consequences of a real and cruel war.

A shock and a shift

Although the war in eastern Ukraine had been going on for ten years, although weeks and days before the actual attack, people were saying that the attack was imminent, no one believed that the whole of Ukraine would be attacked. And then, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, starting the largest war conflict in Europe since the Second World War. The crux of the matter is that Russia crossed the line of international law and treaties through military aggression against an internationally recognized member of the United Nations (UN). Initially, the full scope of the attack was unclear, as Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” to “demilitarize and denazify” Ukraine, claiming that Russia had no plans to occupy the country. Eventually, the war operations escalated, as did the propaganda war. I will focus here on the ideological context of the “cruel war” trope, which is linked to the first reactions to this war. My aim here is to place it in the context of issues of war and cruelty and to show that the “cruel war” trope paradoxically both condemns and accepts the realities of war. Simultaneously, it adapts us, the observers, to the “new reality” of future global geostrategic relations. Other wars and conflicts that have occurred since the beginning of the war in Ukraine prove that relations are changing irreversibly, also leading to a profound and fundamental shift in the status of war within the new emerging global order (and with it, the global tolerance of violence, brutality, cruelty and atrocities).

This shift has many consequences. One of them is that wars are now accompanied by the more or less passive observation of actions prohibited by international law and international treaties, protocols and conventions. This is an effect of the paralysis of the international mechanisms built up over decades to prevent such situations (especially

the UN Council) by one or another of the great superpowers. As if by tacit and mutual agreement, (localized) wars are now a way of settling international disputes and seizing territory. This seems to be exactly the case with Azerbaijan’s intervention in Gorski Karabakh in October 2023 and the Israel-Hamas war that began at the same time. These two wars have a long history of conflict. One of the many differences between the two is that Israel initially responded to the killing, massacre and kidnapping of hundreds of civilians by Hamas on 7 October 2023. Virtually no one denies Israel’s right to defend itself and to take military action. But where does justifiable action end and abuse of that right begin? Undoubtedly, Israel is now using this war to settle old scores and take actions that are explicitly prohibited by international law.

For all these reasons, I argue that war has been tacitly re-legitimized by all the major actors in our contemporary multipolar world today. This claim may seem rather bold, but it is reflected in the ideological shifts I discuss here. Indeed, if we look closely at the ideological discourses surrounding recent war conflicts, we can see that they reveal more than they want. They reveal the moral and legal basis for new geostrategic relations between the superpowers. This basis is quite realistic in its indifference to the cruelty of war; in essence, this new basis means a farewell to the post-war idealism of the defence of human rights. Everything forbidden, prohibited and sanctioned in the international legal order that emerged after the Second World War is now permitted. From this perspective, the picture of the new emerging world order looks rather bleak. However, such an open advocacy of power can never be permanent; eventually, it must always resort to legal means and hide itself. The most effective use of force is always an implicit one. Once you have to use force openly, there is always a cost. Therefore, this new emerging global order can only be temporary and transient. Rather than a pessimistic or cynical acceptance of it, I call here for a general rejection of its basic premises.

A cruel war

Although I am assuming a sudden shock and a shift here, I am well aware, and we will see more clearly later when we look at the issue of cruelty, that changes have been taking place in small steps over a longer period. Even if it seems that everything happened with the singular shock of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which undermined the foundations of our current international ideological landscape, especially the Western and European one, there has been a long prehistory of disagreements and other conflicts. Although I will not go into the causes, analyses and reasons for prehistory, with the military aggression, it seemed that the two sides did not even agree on what kind of conflict it was. While the Ukrainians, and with them most of the world, claimed that it was a war, the Russian authorities, as already mentioned, called it a “special military operation in

Ukraine". Initially, and for some time, they even severely punished some individuals for using the word "war" in this context. Since 2024, however, President Putin himself openly speaks of a war. Of course, the Russian side was primarily interested in the reactions and understanding of its own Russian public, which was initially unwilling to accept that this was a war. After the brief military operation failed, the war dragged on and began to take a high bloody toll on all sides, making it necessary to turn the propaganda tables. Such a turn of events required some preparation, of course, and according to some indices, Russia had started its propaganda machine well over a year before the military aggression that followed. This meant flexing its muscles in front of its own public, showing that Russia, as a traditional military power and one of the winners of the Second World War, could no longer allow itself to be humiliated by the West. Appeals to power are already a traditional part of Russian propaganda and have previously been used to intimidate adversaries. However, when the planned military intervention failed, Russia had to admit publicly that this was a war. Now, it is a new great war, a war against the degenerate West and its colonization of the world, a war to defend Russian traditional values.

This terminological shift in the form of Russia's admission of war is neither insignificant nor trivial. Indeed, characterizing the conflict as a war influences the assessment of the situation and its potential consequences. War is, after all, something cruel and, in the peaceful post-Second World War setting, something abhorrent. Let us recall that Pope Francis was one of the first to describe the war in Ukraine as cruel. The Pope repeatedly condemned the conflict in 2022 as a "cruel war", while then-European leaders, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, described this war as one of "unimaginable cruelty" during their visit to Ukraine in June 2022, just a few months after the invasion. As mentioned, the Russian side did not initially speak of a war. However, from the beginning, the Russians operated on the same ideological terrain and moved within the same ideological territory. When it felt the need, it too adopted a similar rhetoric, the rhetoric of cruelty. For example, when Darya Dugina, the daughter of the ultranationalist Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, was killed in a bomb attack in August 2022, President Putin described the act in a public statement days later as a "heinous, cruel crime." It was immediately clear that the Russian side also equated cruelty with moral repugnance. This suggests that their initial emphasis on a "special military operation" was probably informed, among other obvious reasons, by an awareness that most people instinctively associate war with cruelty. And, if war is cruel, it is repulsive and abhorrent. As we shall see, this attitude toward cruelty is more paradoxical, ambivalent and ambiguous than it might appear. The reasons for this lie, among other things, in the elusive and slippery definition of cruelty itself, which has consequences and implications for the understanding of war as well.

Until now, there has undoubtedly been a consensus that wars are inherently cruel. Although one of Carl von Clausewitz's points in *On War* is that modern wars are less and less cruel, history has proven him blatantly wrong. Modern wars for him were the

Napoleonic Wars, while many subsequent wars in the 19th century, the Crimean War, the American Civil War and the Boer Wars, not to mention the wars of the 20th century, including the two world wars, were egregiously cruel. Therefore, in the post-Second World War era, there seems to be a consensus that all war is cruel, hence the rallying cry: "Never again!" However, it is important to note that this "never again" refers to several things at once, not just war *stricto sensu*. In this case, "never again" refers to war, the Holocaust and many other atrocities, such as the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the like. We want none of that anymore.¹ And we do not want cruelty in the first place. As we will see, cruelty is more elusive than it may first appear. Principles and desires or demands are one thing. Another is the question of how and in what way they can be realized for everyone, or eliminated without distinction. In doing so, however, one eye has been closed.

The hypocritical position lies in the fact that after the Second World War, the wars in the world never really ended. All these wars are cruel and full of atrocities, and yet it is the war in Ukraine that is now being described as cruel in 2022. To be clear, I am not saying that the war in Ukraine is not cruel, despicable or horrible. But here, the phrase "cruel war" is more of a rallying cry. A cry not only with the specific function of condemning the war but of waging a defensive war together with Ukraine, which means that it is also a call to accept the inevitability of the war. There have been cases in the past where the cruelty of a war has been used as a rallying cry to end that cruelty and, consequently, to end a war. It is strange that in this case, war is said to be cruel, but not with the intention of stopping the war, but of winning it. There is no intention of stopping the cruelty of this war because they both seem to be imposed by the enemy. War also seems inevitable in other contemporary cases where war is particularly cruel, such as Israel's current war in Gaza. Although it is full of atrocities and brutalities against civilians (as well as journalists and UN and humanitarian workers) and already has elements of genocide, the condemnation of it as cruel is far less unanimous than in the case of the war in Ukraine, where the West and many other countries were almost unanimous in their condemnation. Initially, there was some unanimity in condemning Hamas's atrocities against civilians, but when it became clear that Israel was clearly not only trying to "neutralize" terrorists but was waging a war against civilians (it "unintentionally" killed more than 40,000 civilians in Gaza alone in the first year of the war), there was simply no general or unanimous condemnation, let alone action to stop it. Despite the condemnation and protests all over the world against it, everyone knows that all this is impotent because of the apparent paralysis in the UN Council as well as other hindrances of Israel's supporters and allies.

¹ For a very insightful set of arguments à propos the "never again argument" see: Martin Pogačar, "Forget Never Again. It's Always Already War," in *Towards a Collective Study in Times of Emergency*, eds. Charles Esche, Ezgi Yurteri, Lama El Khatib, Martin Pogačar, Nick Aikens, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Sara Buraya Boned, <https://internationaleonline.org/publications/collective-study-in-times-of-emergency/>, 169–182.

Living in denial (of war)

Such hypocrisy, especially when it comes to war, is nothing new. There are many double standards when it comes to war, let alone the “cruelty of war”. Some wars are inherently cruel and full of atrocities but are not even called or universally condemned as wars, let alone unanimously labelled as cruel (take two Congo wars in the 1990s). Sometimes, such hypocrisy or “living in denial” is even more systematic and structural. Take, for example, the blatant “pro-EU argument” that uses the post-war period as the longest period without war(s) in Europe to support the unification and EU accession processes. Why must all this be supported by an argument that is, if not a lie, a terrible simplification? Wasn’t Europe divided precisely because of war, the “Cold War”? Arguably, the Cold War was not a cold war. As Alex Taek-Gwang Lee puts it – and he is hardly alone in this – it was “one of the hottest wars in history”.² Moreover, proxy wars were an integral part of the Cold War. Hence, the arms never stopped running after the Second World War, as the civil wars in China and Greece continued, both ending in 1949. Over the next decades, other proxy wars followed and never really stopped, from the Korean and Vietnam wars to the war in Afghanistan, the war between Iran and Iraq, the wars in Africa, and so on. The fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War and intensified the process of European unification, did not mean the end of wars. On the contrary, many bloody and cruel wars followed in the 1990s (in the former Yugoslavia and Chechnya). Often described as “wars on our doorstep” or “wars two hours away by plane”, these wars could be seen as a continuation of the Cold War, even as proxy wars. Maybe Putin is right; maybe, in a way, the Cold War never really ended. All these wars have always been European, except they were not fought “in our European backyard”. That war is never really that far away is proven not least by the war on terrorism, which “knocked on our doors” first with the planes that crashed into the World Trade Centers on 11 September 2001, and then with the terrorist attacks in Madrid, London, Paris, etc. The war on terror began, and in some ways, it continues today. All these cruel wars have been with us all along, even though we have pretended – more or less successfully, with more or less setbacks – that Europe is not at war.

Have we been “living in denial” all along, or are we just “in denial” this time? The phrase “being in denial” or “living in denial” has become an integral part of today’s popular culture. Everyone seems to be in denial about everything. The sociologist and criminologist Stanley Cohen, longtime Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, provides a comprehensive list of common English expressions and phrases in that vein (“turning a blind eye”, “burying one’s head in the sand”, “seeing what one wants to see”, “living a lie”,³ etc.). “States of denial”, as he calls them, are “assertions that something

did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about. There are three possibilities about the truth-value of these assertions. The first and simplest is that these assertions are indeed true, justified and correct”.⁴ A second possibility is also logically simple and concerns the deliberate, intentional and conscious statement intended to deceive – that is, to lie. The truth is clearly known, but for many reasons – personal or political, justifiable or unjustifiable and so on – it is concealed, masked, withheld or otherwise suppressed. The denial here is conscious and intentional. The third and most complicated possibility concerns states in which one is not fully aware of whether one is suppressing, shutting down or blocking something out. Here, one is not simply telling the truth or deliberately lying. There is more. The status of “knowing” the truth or untruth is not entirely clear here; it is not even clear what knowing is. To “know” something, Cohen argues, may be more ambiguous than we realize or are willing to admit or acknowledge. Admitting is also quite dubious – it is one thing to admit something to oneself, quite another to admit something to others (to whom and to whom not), or to admit something publicly. Here, we are approaching the territory of psychoanalysis, and it is rather strange and disappointing that Cohen does not take it seriously and does not know what to do with it.⁵ According to him, psychoanalysis has internal contradictions, but basically, it is Cohen who fails to see the fundamental difference between psychoanalytic terms and the operations of denial, repression and disavowal. I will return to this later, but to Cohen’s credit, he tries to make things as clear as possible.

On the one hand, he continues to differentiate between different statuses at the two poles of the equation – on the side of the object (of what is being defined), he differentiates between literal, interpretive and implicative possibilities. In contrast, on the side of the subject (who), he differentiates between its status, i.e., whether someone is a perpetrator, a victim or a bystander to some harm, suffering or damage done to someone else. On the other hand, Cohen created this whole sociology of denial precisely to figure out how to deal with obvious atrocities, brutalities, war crimes or similar violations and blatant injustices that are “somehow tolerated”. In my view, this is a struggle with cruelty in one form or another, although cruelty is not Cohen’s focus. Cohen only mentions cruelty here and there in passing. Yet, he is somehow aware of it: “Whole societies are based on forms of cruelty, discrimination, repression or exclusion which are ‘known’ but never openly acknowledged”.⁶ Cohen is also well aware of the ongoing presence of war, yet precisely this presence should be problematized in the first place. Or, as British philosopher A. C. Grayling puts it: “War has been a salient aspect of human civilization for the last 5,000, if not the last 10,000 years. We should not normalise this”.⁷

2 Alex Taek-Gwang Lee, “Ghosts of Civilized Violence,” in: *Conversations on Violence: An Anthology*, eds. Brad Evans and Adrian Parr (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 138.

3 Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 1–3.

4 Ibid., 3.

5 Ibid., 25–35.

6 Ibid., 11.

7 A. C. Grayling, *War: An Enquiry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), ix.

The “cruel war” trope is an attempt to specify this by linking together two equally abhorrent things: cruelty and war. It is a fact that all wars are cruel. What is so horrible about the fact that wars are cruel? The cruelty of war is spontaneously associated with destruction, death, violence, crime, atrocity, brutality, savagery and barbarism. Given all this, one might expect that there should be fewer wars today or that modern wars should do as little harm as possible, causing fewer deaths and injuries. Even if the goals of such wars are strictly military and limited (despite occasional “collateral damage”), even if the actual destruction may be minimal, these wars have paralyzed and destroyed entire countries. The French philosopher Alain Badiou speaks in this context of “*zonage*” or “zoning,” which refers to areas where war leads to the absence of the state and to anarchy and where “entire zones are left to fascist-type political gangsterism”.⁸ This phenomenon, which is not only a significant source of terrorism and waves of migration, testifies to the fact that a human being, as Badiou says, has become dispensable and expendable. The non-white human being, of course. Millions, if not billions, of people simply do not count. That is cruelty *par excellence*.

But the cruelty of war is not only killing or “collateral damage”. It also lies in the fact that war disrupts the lives of many people in indelible and irreversible ways. Of soldiers and civilians alike, and in today’s global age, of practically everyone, even those who are far away. The war in Ukraine is certainly not a conflict with minimal consequences. It is a war that will affect many lives and, in some ways, the entire planet since the war’s effects “do not stop when the shooting stops”.⁹ For many, nothing will be the same again in the war’s aftermath. And that is why this war can indeed be called cruel. So, the cruelty of war goes beyond atrocities – every war leaves indelible and irreversible marks, effects and consequences on the lives of many. Every war causes widespread destruction and damage. It not only kills people, disrupts social systems, destroys the environment and creates instability and terror, but its most negative aspect is that its effects are irreversible. Its cruelty lies in the fact that it affects us permanently – wounding, damaging and changing the course of our lives in ways over which no one has any control. Not only is a war something that the majority of people do not want, expect or choose, but every war leaves effects that no one can predict.

Wars are mostly negative, except for those who take advantage of them, such as arms dealers and other dogs of war. The so-called consequentialist argument against war comes from the consequences – there are always more negatives than positives – so it is against war. The deontological argument against war is even stricter and comes from the fact that war forces us to violate moral norms in one way or another. By its very logic, war demands that soldiers violate the basic moral rule against killing and that the states that wage war are fundamentally corrupt as far as they focus on power, violence and destruction

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Notre mal vient de plus loin: Penser les tueries du 13 novembre* (Paris: Fayard, 2016), 37, translation P. K.

⁹ Grayling, *War*, 170.

at the expense of justice, care and other positive values. So, war is bad by definition, except – except!? – when it is not. Hm, there has been a long tradition since Thomas Aquinas about whether a just war – that is, a war in self-defence – is morally acceptable¹⁰. In the case of Ukraine, things seem clear, although they are not – even Putin does not admit that the Russian aggression is an attack. However, from the very beginning, he claims that Russia was forced to respond with force to a force and a threat (that of NATO being on its immediate borders). Moreover, Putin claims that his war is a defensive war, also from the point of view of defending “our” (read: Russian = traditional Orthodox = non-Western liberal) “way of life”. To cut a long story short – yes, throughout history, there have been many arguments about when and under what circumstances a war can be justified as a “just war”, but I will close this discussion with this thought.

What is important to me here is that the consensus is that war and cruelty are bad things. No one wants war except those who are forced into it. This, in turn, is a matter of great debate because the cruelty of war is precisely that “war is forced upon us”.

The troubles with cruelty and cruel wars

No one wants to be associated with cruelty – the last seventy years since the Second World War have been devoted to its systematic persecution and even prosecution. Cruelty has been criminalized since the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Article 5 defines it as follows: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. Moreover, cruelty is increasingly prosecuted not only against humans but also against all living beings. This undoubtedly raises certain problems. This is not only because the scope of cruelty is expanding but also because cruelty is, by definition, a “grey area”, for example, when it is not possible to determine the intent or the perpetrator, and thus the criminal and ethical responsibility. Certain kinds of cruelty are part of the system – whether political, economic, legal or military. Certain types of cruelty are not violent. Or bloody. Moreover, cruelty is less and less associated with blood and brutality, as the etymologies of the word *cruor* suggest. This does not mean there is less cruelty today, but rather the opposite.

Here we are amid the fundamental paradox that cruelty presents to us. Cruelty always takes place on multiple levels; the problems associated with it are multi-faceted. Systematic works dealing with it are rare and practically non-existent.¹¹ The famous and

¹⁰ For the notion of “just war” see: Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (London: Basic Books 1978); Paul Robinson, ed. *Just War in a Comparative Perspective* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

¹¹ For an excellent overview of the topics of cruelty see: Giorgio Baruchello, *Philosophy of Cruelty: Collected Philosophical Essays* (Gatineau: Northwest Passage Books, 2017).

well-known definitions of cruelty, which range from Aristotle to Montaigne, Machiavelli, Sade, Nietzsche, Artaud and Rosset, but which we cannot go into in detail here, have practically no common denominator. What is the specificity of cruelty? Cruelty is violence, or rather the excess of “violence in violence”. This is not easy to define. Above all, it is difficult to prevent it in advance. But the paradox is that once cruelty has occurred, it is, in a sense, irreversible, unabolishable. A cruel act (or non-act), even if we remove its consequences and try to symbolically undo it, is, in a sense, irremovable. Cruelty is thus, on the one hand, a transcendence; it crosses a threshold, but it is not simply the result of an intensification since it crosses a certain threshold or line. This crossing of the line is indelible; cruelty has an irreversible effect through its actions. Cruelty, as a phenomenon of the extreme, concerns a certain excess. Although it is forbidden, cruelty is everywhere. We are all cruel. Cruelty happens, and it happens again and again despite the almost universal consensus that it is undesirable and unacceptable. But this is precisely why cruelty is something indigestible, not only in the sense of revulsion but also in the sense of dialectic – cruelty is a “bone in the throat”.

The spontaneous ideology upon which the consensual rejection of cruelty is based is, of course, oblivious to all the paradoxes of cruelty mentioned above. For it, cruelty is something self-evident and recognizable. Cruelty is evil. Period. Once this evil is recognized, it must be eliminated and eradicated. But things are more complicated than they first appear. The key to cruelty is not so much the will, the action, the pleasure or enjoyment, but the intention, which can also manifest in its opposite, as non-intention or non-action. As ignorance and indifference. Even more. Even if cruelty can be associated with suffering and violence, not every cruel act is violent. Conversely, not every act of violence is cruel. For example, if someone asks me for help or if I could help someone at no cost to myself, and I do not, I can be cruel without being violent. It does not have to be for my amusement or pleasure. There is also a dimension that we can only hint at here, a dimension in which we lose the possibility of distancing ourselves from cruelty because we are immersed in it. Cruelty is not only the “dark side” of culture, as many following Nietzsche and Benjamin emphasize. It also concerns the many uncomfortable facets of modern life that touch us inwardly much more than we are willing to admit. So let us say that cruelty is what a fetish is for Freud: doubly knotted from opposites.

The point is that cruelty is not as overtly recognizable as it is portrayed in popular images that depict freaks as cruel, like the Marquis de Sade or another well-known character, Cruella (*nomen est omen*), from the Disney story based on Dodie Smith’s 1956 novel *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*. Cruelty is usually portrayed as sadistic, degenerate and barbaric, something that we, as civilized people, should leave behind. Brutality is another name for cruelty, for the side of cruelty that supposedly clings to crudeness, to nature, to the lowest in man, to animality and bestiality. The problem is that cruelty also concerns the civilized in man. The highest and the lowest in cruelty coincide, as in Hegel’s speculative judgment: cruelty encompasses the point at which man is least human, his most brutal,

crudest side, and at the same time, the point at which man is most refined, most cultivated, most sophisticated, most human – and yet cruel. In cruelty, there is a short circuit between the most barbaric and brutal and the most civilized and cultivated. In cruelty, nature and culture coincide. This is why the progressive ideology that associates the disappearance of cruelty with progress and civilization is so wrong. With progress, cruelty, at best, becomes more, not less. Where exactly cruelty occurs, however, always depends on the individual case; it depends on crossing a threshold, an excess, or an exaggeration. That is why the cruellest and worst wars involve the greatest exaggeration and the greatest destruction. But just as cruel – perhaps even crueller – are the wars in which this brutality and exaggeration are absent.

Is cruelty even avoidable, or is there already, as Freud believed, a “drive to cruelty”,¹² *Trieb zur Grausamkeit*? Freud later modified his position slightly in his work *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930), linking cruelty to the instance of the superego and to the foundations of culture itself. Cruelty is not only something that belongs to nature; culture is also interwoven with cruelty. Cruelty can be practised in a sophisticated, “cultural” way, “according to certain rules” – as in sports, for example. We live in a society of spectacle, permeated by sporting spectacles that show us daily “how cruel life is”: sports quickly (and cruelly) divide us into winners and losers. Sporting events are a socially acceptable war.

Moreover, some cruelties are among the “dirty secrets” that are not officially known but, in reality, occur everywhere. One example is torture¹³, which is consensually, declaratively and legally considered to be cruelty par excellence. Torture should not exist. Period. The problem is that it is mostly practised by the very entities that are supposed to prosecute it – nation-states. As Amnesty International regularly reports, most countries in the world practise torture, but none of them recognize it. There have even been attempts, especially since 9/11, to philosophically and legally justify torture. These attempts have not (yet) succeeded, but they have blurred the clear line between what is acceptable and what is tolerable. Torture is not just about the extreme and physical abuse of the body, the loss of dignity when exposed to a torturer and torture devices. The cruelty of torture occurs on multiple levels: as a method, as an end, as a means and as a by-product. Torture is not simply an increase in physical violence but is necessary to avoid premature death (even if this cannot be ruled out in the end). Torture must first achieve its immediate goal (betrayal, wringing out secrets, humiliation, dehumanization, subjugation), treading the fine line between *Verfleischung* and *Vernichtung*, between making flesh out of a person’s body and annihilating it. To this end, it uses the most barbaric and sophisticated methods, known as “white torture”, which leave “no trace”. These methods are very diverse – as always, the human imagination knows no bounds when it comes to cruelty – and “range

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905a), *Standard Edition of Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. VII (Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 159.

¹³ My arguments below rely heavily on: Donatella Di Cesare, *Torture*, trans. David Broder (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

from forced sleep deprivation to spatiotemporal disorientation, from immobilization to isolation, from sexual violence to psychological torment, and from simulated execution to all manner of physical and emotional humiliation. Thus even after torture was apparently banned, it transformed into something else to the point that it went beyond the classic concept and put the definitions of the past to the test”.¹⁴

Torture is a prime example of the elusiveness of cruelty. We are all declaratively against it, but much is done in secret. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, it is torture (in the context of the post-9/11 debates on torture mentioned above, and after the revelations of the scandalous abuses and torture at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004) that illustrates “where the greatest dangers really lie: in the ‘unknown known things,’ the unacknowledged beliefs, assumptions and obscene practices that we pretend not to know about, even as they form the backdrop of our public values. That’s why the US military leadership’s assurance [after the Abu Ghraib affair] that there were no ‘direct orders’ to humiliate and torture prisoners is ridiculous: of course not, because as anyone familiar with military life knows, such things are not done that way. There are no formal orders. Nothing is put in writing, just unofficial pressure, hints, and instructions given in private; that’s how you participate in a dirty secret ...”¹⁵

In short, for all these reasons, despite our good intentions, we have not (yet) succeeded in suppressing or eliminating cruelty. Nor have we succeeded in stopping violence and war, which are intertwined and connected. One of Clausewitz’s most quoted and well-known theses from *On War* is: “War is only the continuation of state policy by other means”.¹⁶ If we limit ourselves to the connection between war and cruelty, we could say that Clausewitz is saying that war has its economic reasons. It has a certain rational justification: a price, a value, a profit. In a sense, war is a continuation of business, of trade, of politics. War has its own rationality, its own reason, its own logos. But to equate war with cruelty is to emphasize something else. That war is something irrational, useless, harmful, abhorrent, and above all, something that represents a break with politics and economics. And if Clausewitz is trying to say that war is a business and that without war, there is no business, then equating war with cruelty distances war and strictly separates it from rationality, from normality.

While all of this is true in some ways, it seems too quick to bracket the fact that business and commerce are linked to war. The military industry is still huge today; wars and capital(ism) always went well together.¹⁷ And although destruction and disaster, both caused by war, play an important role in modern capitalism, we pretend that business and capitalism have nothing to do with it. Clausewitz knew that war is “a clash between

major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed”.¹⁸ He knew that the goal of war – the destruction of the enemy’s forces is that “they must be put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight”¹⁹ is neither without violence nor without the resulting cruelty. However, for Clausewitz, the immediate goal of war is not cruelty. Indeed, as I mentioned before and as Clausewitz wrote in the introduction to his work, he was convinced that wars today have become less and less cruel. As we can see, Clausewitz is also dominated by the Enlightenment credo (or rather ideology, to call a spade a spade) that as civilization progresses, cruelty becomes less and less. Although there are neither fewer wars nor less cruelty today, there is a kind of unwritten rule that there should be as few deaths as possible – if there must be war, we think, then with as few casualties as possible. Above all, the war should be fair. And as far away from us as possible. We do not want war, but if it cannot be avoided, then we want a war without war, as in Žižek’s well-known case of coffee without caffeine. A limited war, a surgical operation. But if a non-invasive operation is possible today, a non-invasive war without cruelty – as I hope I have shown above – is not. *Wars are* (out there). And they *are* cruel.

The disavowal (of cruel wars out there)

So, how do we interpret these discrepancies? How do we deal with the fact that war has been prosecuted in principle, condemned, limited and seemingly abolished, and yet wars (still) exist? How do we understand that most people in the West pretend that cruel wars are “somewhere far away out there”? How do we understand the fact that after every terrorist attack, the spontaneous reaction is to want to win it (while dealing with it): the terrorists must not win; they must not achieve their goal, so our way of life must not change in any way. Why this pretence, or rather the pretence that life/business goes on as usual? Why must the show go on?

How can this be explained? Such a case is a compromise operation that Freud calls disavowal.²⁰ The operation of disavowal thus involves a paradoxical combination in which “the wolf is fed, and the goat is whole”. The usual reasoning uses the form “I know well, but all the same ...” so beautifully highlighted by Octave Mannoni.²¹ In the case of wars and cruelty, this means that we know very well at the level of knowledge that there are still wars, that there is terrorism, that there is a war industry, and that wars are cruel, and yet we believe that it has nothing to do with us. And that it will have nothing to do with

¹⁴ Di Cesare, *Torture*, 18.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Premakniti podzemlje!,” *Problemi* 51 (5–6/2004): 185, translation P. K.

¹⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, d. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁷ See: Éric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Wars and Capital* (Cambridge: Semiotexte, MIT Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ For more on that see the excellent book by Alenka Zupančič, *Disavowal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024).

²¹ Octave Mannoni, “I Know Well, but All the Same ...,” trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in: *Perversion and the Social Relation*, edited by Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 68–92.

us in the future. The denial is not simply a denial. It is rather a pretence, a confession that is neutralized and, simultaneously potentiated, affirmed. Negated and confirmed at the same time and in the very same gesture, word or symbol. In this sense, every time we see the daily news from around the world, every time we are affected by the brutality, cruelty and savagery of a war that is taking place somewhere in the world, the operation of disavowal is only intensified. Paradoxically, by affirming its reality and cruelty, we keep our distance from war (even if it is only “two hours away” by car or plane). Paradoxically, it is precisely this that protects us from the cruel reality (of war) and our participation in it – precisely in the sense that, for Freud, the role of the fetish is a sign of triumph over – and protection against – the threat of castration.²² The fetish is a screen that both conceals and reveals the cruelty of war, a compromise formation that both acknowledges and denies what it points to. The consensual condemnation of war as cruel is certainly one such fetish. To say that wars are cruel is therefore doubled – we say, confirm and affirm *and* simultaneously deny, negate and annul.

But this is unfortunately not our last word on cruelty. It is clear that cruelty is unacceptable to everyone, but it cannot be avoided completely when there is an armed conflict, a war. In war and armed conflict, cruelty is doubled because the military conflict alone is one thing, and all the possible excesses that go with it are quite another. The main paradox is that we try to regulate this excess – just another name for cruelty – and yet we can never abolish it. To the extent that such excess goes beyond purely military action, it violates the Geneva Convention. But the paradox remains. One kind of cruelty in the form of excesses, war crimes, is recognized as unnecessary, forbidden and avoidable. In contrast, the other, war itself, is undesirable in principle but unalterable because it is inherent in the thing itself, i.e., war. It is as if, in addition to atrocities that are “inevitable” or conditionally “permissible” because they involve the “legitimate” but cruel violence of war, there are also atrocities that are unnecessary and avoidable. As if these atrocities and cruelties were essential and contingent, legitimate and illegitimate. Some atrocities are considered unavoidable as long as there is war. They cannot be eliminated or punished. They are part of the war and perceived as something objective. Although war consists of the subjective, it transcends it. In this sense, violence in war is not, strictly speaking, perceived as subjective, even though it is based on many subjective decisions and actions. And therein lies the paradox. Of course, a war crime remains a crime, but war itself is, in a sense, also a crime, but it is not prosecuted as such. War is criminal in itself, by its very nature. In this sense, it is a kind of objective, collective cruelty, which, of course, emanates from individuals, but none of whom are held accountable for their “legitimate” violence. War, as such, is cruel not only to the enemy but also to one’s side and neutral third parties. No convention, treaty or international protocol regulates or punishes this, however cruel and merciless it may be.

Finally, the spontaneous (more or less ideological) notion of war and cruelty reminds us, if anything, that war – even if it is not cruel, barbaric or brutal – cannot but be something fundamentally cruel. War, as such, is cruel. By nature, by essence. And if cruelty is recognized and sanctioned by consensus, then war should be, too. War is a crime. Wars should be abolished. No more wars. Period.

Summary

The chapter discusses the recent shift in the ideological understanding of war in a specific context. First, it focuses on the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and on the ideological context of the “cruel war” trope, which is linked to the first reactions to this war. From this, it moves to discuss a profound and fundamental shift in the status of war within the new emerging global order (and with it, the global tolerance of violence, brutality, cruelty and atrocities), which can be seen in other ongoing wars today. The chapter further argues that war has been tacitly re-legitimized by all the major actors in our contemporary multipolar world today. The author then refers back to the legacies of 20th-century wars and the relevance of “never again” and analyses the “cruel war” trope as an attempt to link together two equally abhorrent things: cruelty and war. At that, he argues that the cruelty of war goes beyond atrocities and that its cruelty lies in the fact that it affects us permanently – wounding, damaging and changing the course of our lives in ways over which no one has any control. The chapter concludes with the observation that war, criminal by its very nature, is often seen as objective, collective cruelty, which, of course, emanates from individuals, but none of whom are held accountable for their “legitimate” violence. War, as such, is cruel not only to the enemy but also to one’s side and neutral third parties.

²² Sigmund Freud, *Fetishism* (1927), *Standard Edition of Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 149.

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