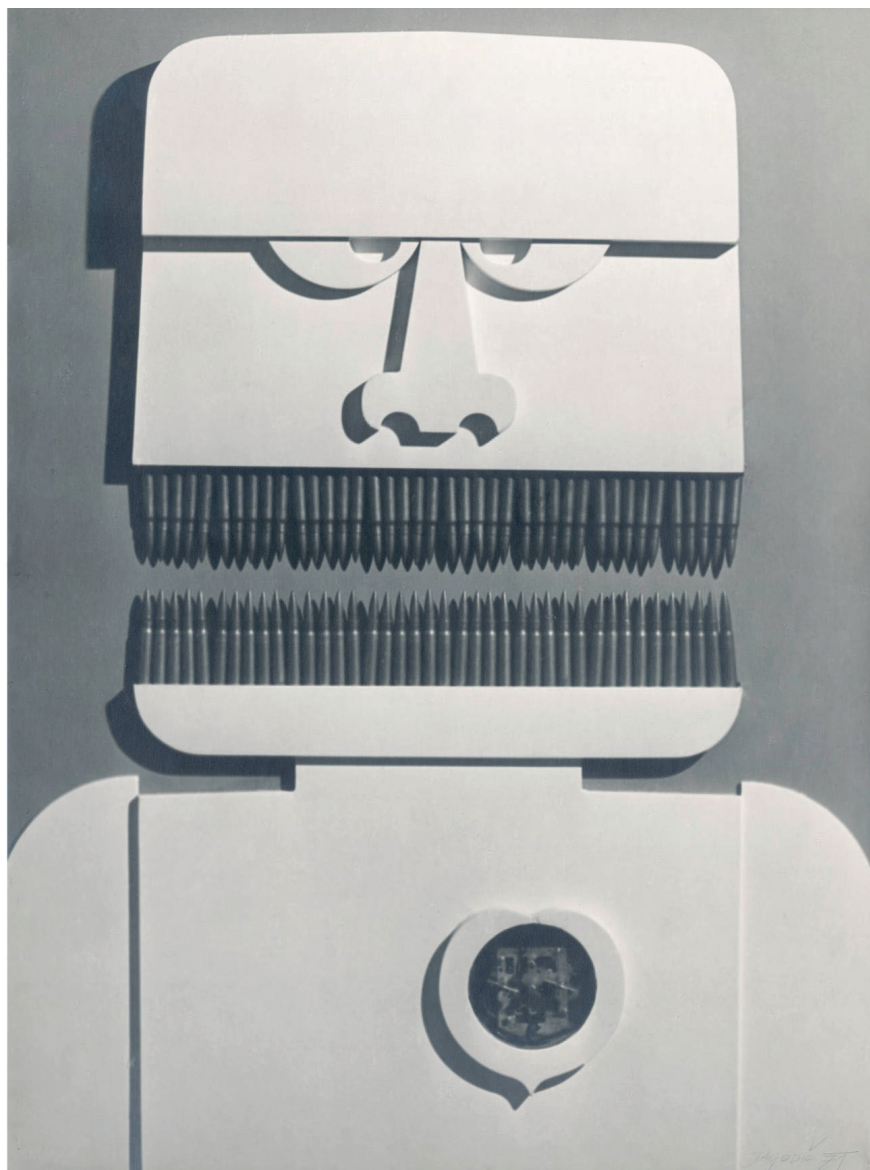


Peace Policies and Practices in Yugoslavia and Beyond



PEACE, UNCONDITIONAL!

Edited by
Sanja Petrović Todosijević and Martin Pogačar

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Belgrade, Ljubljana
2025

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Gal Kirn*

Balkan Route to and from War: Reflections on Peace in Šejla Kamerić's *Cease* (2023) and Nika Autor's *Sunny Railways* (2023)**

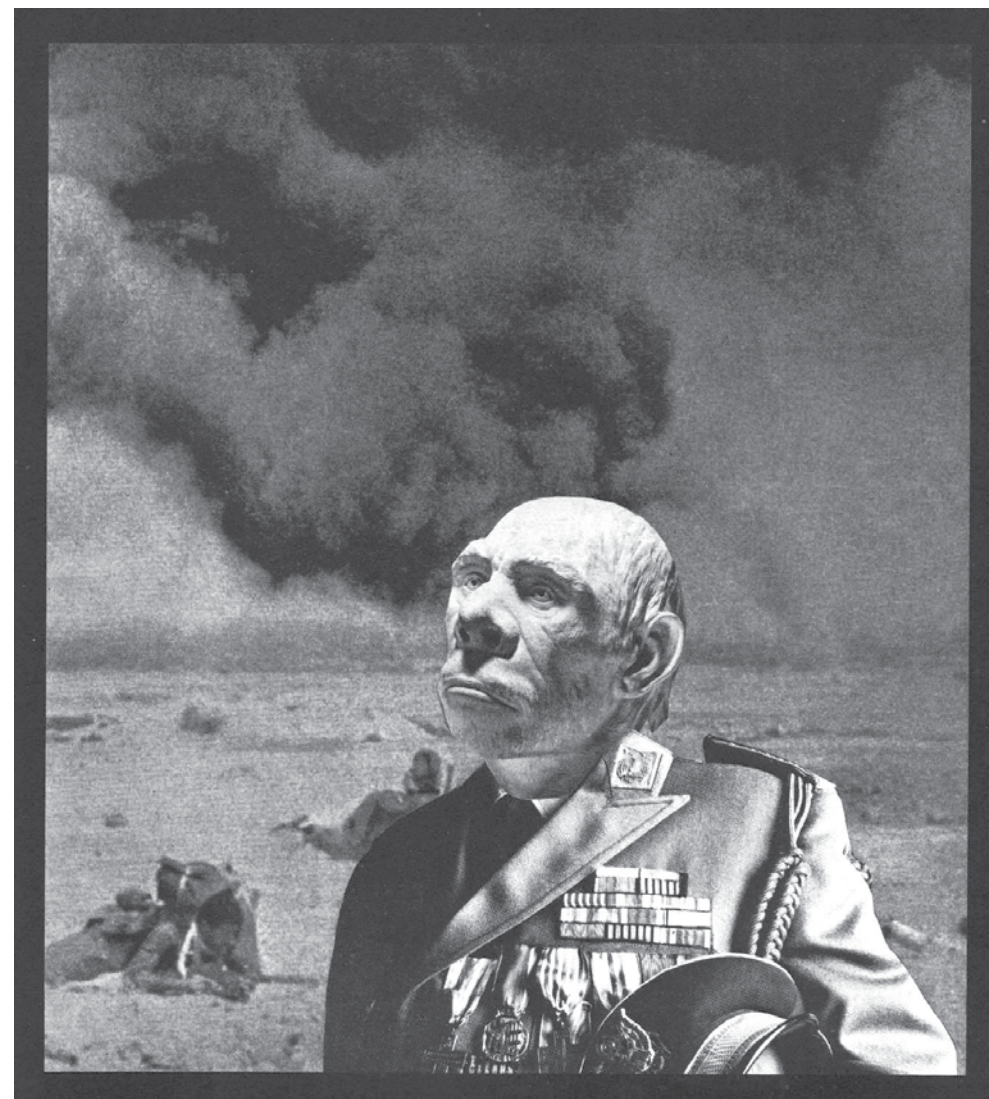
Abstract The article starts with a short critical investigation of how such a strong *normalisation of war* took place in recent years. The first part of the article explains the catastrophic transition of (post-)Yugoslavia, which functions as a sort of announcement of the new future for Europe. In juxtaposition to war, the second part of the article articulates a need for intersectional peace and looks closer at two inspiring artists/artworks from the post-Yugoslav context. If Šejla Kamerić's works intervene in the mechanism of violence by creating images and figures of peace, Nika Autor's films aim to reactivate the emancipatory legacy of the past as utopian futurity. Beyond an empty gesture or normative idea of "perpetual peace", any politics of peace, as well as its aesthetic orientation, will need to create an imaginary that connects peace and social and environmental justice.

Keywords normalisation of war, images of war, images of peace, intersectional peace, Šejla Kamerić, Nika Autor, new Europe, post-Yugoslav transition, vision of future, primitive accumulation of capital

War must be killed ... There is not only the prodigious opposition of interested parties – financiers, speculators great and small, armor-plated in their banks and houses, who live on war and live in peace during war, with their brows stubbornly set upon a secret doctrine and their faces shut up like safes. There are those who

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Stane Jagodič, *Visionary*, photomontage, 1985

admire the exchange of flashing blows, who hail ... the bright colors of uniforms; those whom military music and the martial ballads poured upon the public intoxicate as with brandy; the dizzy-brained, the feeble-minded, the superstitious, the savages. There are those who bury themselves in the past, on whose lips are the sayings only of bygone days, the traditionalists for whom an injustice has legal force because it is perpetuated, who aspire to be guided by the dead, progress and the future and all their palpitating passion to the realm of ghosts and nursery-tales.¹

Introduction

The text gives a short historical and conceptual meditation on the burning question: why has peace become increasingly absent from the dominant discourse and politics, and how come the process of *normalisation of war* took place so swiftly? I will look into the final closing of the historical sequence that is famous for the “end of history”,² the demise of inefficient and authoritarian socialism and the advent of democratic, “peaceful” and capitalist transition. Contrary to the mainstream narrative, I will demonstrate that the post-Yugoslav transition functioned as a more radicalised form of the same process: “primitive accumulation of capital”, fuelled by nationalist resurgence and memory wars, ended in real wars. This normalisation of violence and war has a much longer history than the narrative of merry European integration presents us with. The text points to a few dominant images and figures of history that help create such a dominant narrative that closes history, concluding with an almost resigned attitude that war and environmental catastrophes are becoming a normal part of our situation. Normalising exception is also another name for the emergence of fascist ideology and apparatus, as Walter Benjamin famously posited. And its historical variation bears resemblance to contemporary conditions. Juxtaposed with the dominant trends and absence of a vision for the future, the second part of the article tackles two artworks from the post-Yugoslav context that keep inspiring and creating *counter*-images to violence and war. Šejla Kamerić’s *Cease* (2024) and Nika Autor’s *Sunny Railways* (2023) reactivate the emancipatory legacy of the past, nurturing the figure/image of peace and utopian futurity. Beyond the empty gesture of calling for peace, a substantial peace politics will need to incite an imaginary that holds an emancipatory promise.

1 Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire: The Story of a Squad* (Apple Books/Project Gutenberg, 2003), 706–707. Barbusse wrote from the trenches of the First World War and became an antifascist and an ardent peace activist.

2 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

Normalisation of war: Permanence of primitive accumulation of nationalist memory and capital

What presents itself today as the new normal in Europe would be seen as crazy, immoral and abnormal just a few years ago: who would have thought that the whole political class would be calling for more armament, competing about who is more prowar, and imposing double standards in the international law context? Furthermore, who would have thought that instead of our vital focus on and investment in addressing the impending ecological and planetary catastrophe, the political class would so swiftly move away from the green transition and call for a European economy strongly baked on the war industry? In March 2024, the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, called for a new and stronger Europe, announcing a strategic shift to a “war economy” in addition to neoliberal austerity to prepare Europe for war. In such an ideological constellation, the political move to the extreme right, accompanied by increasing repression against alternative views, dissent and migrants, and the policing of discourse that shrinks spaces of freedom, should not come as a surprise. To summarise in one sentence: we are witnessing a full-scale *normalisation of war*. War has become omnipresent and, again, much closer to Europe. Or, to take a dialectical turn, we can also speak of a long process of “pacification” of the oppressed classes, a process that Mark Neocleous (2014) defined as a strategy of the ruling class to abuse “peace” in order to launch new sorts of wars (e.g., war on drugs, war on poverty, war on terror, war against corruption), which end up pacifying, that is, dominating society and its conflicts. If it had not been before, it is now clear even to those from the liberal camp that the age of the 1989 triumph – identified with the democratic potentiality of Europe, peace, reunification and integration under the banners of human rights, rule of law and welfare state – is now completely over.

The dissolving of the welfare, and once more cosmopolitan, frame has long been in the making: firstly, if we take seriously a large part of historical and memorial revisionism and ideological shifts, we will not be surprised to see new Europe born in the frame of anti-communism and a new nationalist resurgence. In memorial landscapes, one can follow the creation of the antitotalitarian frame – a frame that equated fascism, antifascism, socialism, communism in the totalitarian spectres of the 20th century – and the dominance of the Holocaust model as the universalising model³ that can be applied to all post-conflictual societies. These major shifts came at the expense of antifascist memory⁴ and ignorance of European colonialism. The second point, often missed in the ideological analysis, is how the process of primitive accumulation of nationalist memory is connected to the

3 Jeffrey C. Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002): 5–85.

4 Enzo Traverso, “Antifascism between Collective Memory and Historical Revisions,” In *Rethinking Antifascism*, edited by Hugo García, Mercedes Yusta, Xavier Tabet, and Cristina Clímaco (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016), 321–339.

broad processes of accumulation of capital. Those sacred welfare and democratic pillars of Europe that many strongly believed in throughout the 1990s and early 2000s have been under attack by the destructive modality of capital itself and its financial representatives. As David Harvey incisively showed, capital's central feature is to move across time and space, destroying obstacles at an accelerated pace, producing "time-space compression".⁵ This view goes against the recurring moralist criticism of the bad financial capital(ists) that run against the good regulated and real capitalist economy. Capital, as such, is beyond the morality of good and evil, while it also does not run simply on itself within the sphere of real economy. Rather, as Marx pointed out at the end of his *Capital* (Vol. 1), for the capitalist mode of production to take hold, different structural conditions need to be met: separation from the means of production in the ongoing processes of dispossession, colonial-market expansion, if needed by violent means and wars, new legal-political regulations, and yes, various symbolic orders that reproduce the system.⁶ The violent side of capitalism is not only a mark of some primitive, *early transition*, but a recurring feature of constant transitioning and revolutionising of capital.

For those coming from the former East in the 1990s, and before that, from South America, opening to financial markets was part of a new cycle of capital's primitive accumulation. Naomi Klein called this process neoliberal "shock therapy".⁷ While in the (post-)Yugoslav context, matters turned even more violent. The (post-)Yugoslav transition to capitalist democracy became a story of collapse, ethnic and social wars, brutal privatisation and dispossession of working people. Nationalist weaponisation of memory most obviously expressed itself in competing victimhoods that fuelled the prejudice of ethnic hatred. This process became the backbone of the "primitive accumulation of memory" and mnemonic wars that paved the path to the nationalist disintegration of Yugoslavia.⁸ The post-Yugoslav transition became an image of a genuine "catastrophe",⁹ where the democratic and capitalist transition was carried out by violent means. The peace of 1989 was gone in 1991, swept away by the full force of war. The imaginary of peace was buried, not without historical irony, in the political entity that had been one of the most inspiring models for lasting peace and politico-economic independence: socialist and federal Yugoslavia, spearheading the Non-Aligned Movement. One can speculate whether this real and symbolic death of Yugoslavia and the burial of the legacy of peaceful co-existence played a part in the "political unconscious"¹⁰ of an emerging global capitalism that had just "ended history". Could such a legacy be tolerated in new Europe, or did it

have to be dismantled? In some historical sequences, Yugoslavia evoked a Kantian "ideal state" engaged in federalism and a non-aligned world that aimed to perpetuate peace. With its antifascist legacy and cosmopolitanism, which respected the national and religious diversity of its working people, Yugoslavia contributed to social conditions that sustained relative prosperity and peace by the end of the 1970s. I emphasise ideally, because it is clear that Yugoslavia and self-management were not immune to the changes in geopolitics, the neoliberalisation of the world system, and the contradictions of its own political and economic processes.¹¹ The images and figures of the Partisan liberation struggle, the AFŽ (Protifašistična fronta žensk / Antifašistička fronta žena; Antifascist Women's Front), Tito, socialism, the federal principle, brotherhood and unity, and non-aligned solidarity have been replaced by glorious nationalist figures, war personae and war criminals, nationalist poets, expressing the only alternative in *one nation in one state*, if possible in its historically invented¹² and politically realised greatness.

Historian Peter Burke emphasised that during the 20th century, images increasingly entered historical research. Images became real sources and evidence,¹³ and moreover, there are particular dominant images and figures of history that mark a specific age and that become a part of collective "historical memory". For 1989, it is clear that the associated images connect to the enthusiastic and triumphalist broadcast of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the advent of freedom and democracy. We see such images, revisions and echoes along the whole historical sequence stretching across a series of textbooks, documentaries, exhibitions. They create the dominant narrative of our particular age. The less self-congratulatory narrative would then switch the TV screen on in 1991, to the history of live broadcasting of the wars in Yugoslavia and Iraq and the large-scale genocidal campaign in Rwanda soon after. Peace, democratic transition and the free market took serious blows. As Negri and Hardt argued in their work *Empire*, the early developments of the new Pax Americana actually paved the way for the consolidation of a new imperial sovereignty predicated on the paradigm of war.¹⁴

The displacement of class antagonisms in the 1990s came with the normalisation of war in the post-Yugoslav context. The whole reality, with its past and future, was painted according to very narrow lenses of religious-nationalist double identification. War presented and continues to present itself as the only solution to the alleged troubles of living together in a multipolar and diverse world. In mainstream media, the argument that war is an inescapable horizon of our future has become entrenched in recent years. When we speak about the normalisation of war, we often return to the theory of Thomas Hobbes, who argued for a strong central authority – a sovereign ruler – that can prevent

5 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

6 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

7 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2008).

8 Gal Kirn, "The Primitive Accumulation of Capital and Memory: Mnemonic Wars as National Reconciliation Discourse in (Post-) Yugoslavia," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1470–1483.

9 Boris Buden, *Transition to Nowhere* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020).

10 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1982).

11 Gal Kirn, *Partisan Ruptures* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

12 Eric Hobsbawm and Ted Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

13 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001).

14 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

the state from reverting to the violent “state of nature”. One should be aware that the “state of nature” in his – and Carl Schmitt’s – conception is not something external to the state, but rather something that is engraved in the frame of the state. Because of this permanent threat to any political order, there is always a justification for a strong state with repressive apparatuses. Evidently, there are differences in how wars are waged, deployed, legitimised. For the proponents of liberal ideology, wars are nominally seen as bad, but a necessary evil, waged in a just and humanitarian way in order to expand the family of the developed and democratic world. For the conservative mind, the normalisation of war radicalises Clausewitz’s old point that wars are but politics continued with other means. Moreover, wars and politics can be only defined by substantialising the distinction of us, friends, against others, “our” enemies.¹⁵ Depending on further twists by the imminent ecological apocalypse, (neo)Malthusians add that wars can even be useful in terms of controlling populations, distributing resources to the developed/enlightened in order for a new balance in the ecosystem to be established. It seems that barbarism progresses without any serious alternative or international organisation. The left-wing orientation is marginalised and points to the current result of class struggle. What is, however, clear is that only a serious articulation of peace can make any left project viable and allow it to participate in a new vision of the future: a future that holds promise and an alternative to war capitalism. Politics of peace is clearly positioned against wars, but it will also express a need to transform the military-industrial complex, hierarchies and profit-oriented, colonial, or market expansionist capitalist projects. What about the old-school partisan Leninist view that professed that imperialist war should be avoided? Lenin was famous for thinking about extreme circumstances, arguing that interimperialist wars should be translated into class war and that war can be seen as the oppressed against oppressors, smaller against bigger nations. However, such a horizon, also ascribed to many of the former people’s liberation struggles, is desperately shrinking, evoked only to a degree in the Zapatistas and Rojava movements.¹⁶

Normalising war, relativisation of fascism and colonialism in the name of nationalisation of the glorious past again brings forward figures of the history of the victors: nationalist poets at best, fascist and colonial leaders, military figures and war criminals at worst. Accompanying this macro-textbook worldview is a multitude of figures that contribute to individualisation: mediatised celebrities, influencers and sports/women who perpetuate the prejudice that everyone is equal and that everyone can succeed if one just tries hard enough. And when an overwhelming majority does not succeed, there are multiple self-help manuals, workfare methods and therapeutical strategies to help us cope with the neoliberal reality.

15 See Schmitt’s conception of the “political”: Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* transl. and Introduction George Schwab and with a new Foreword by Tracy B. Strong and Notes by Leo Strauss (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).

16 As Balibar rightly pointed out, the revolutionary thought and practice of the 20th century oscillated between two very different figures: Lenin and Gandhi, which could have led and did indeed lead to further splits and divisions; see: Étienne Balibar, “Lenin and Gandhi: A missed encounter?,” *Radical Philosophy* 172 (Mar/Apr 2012): 9–17.

And yet, despite the challenges and series of defeats of the oppressed, there have always been, and will continue to be, movements of resistance and ruptures against the prevailing state of affairs. Despite the odds, voices calling for peace and serious alternatives will persistently emerge. Most recently, one such alternative was personified by figures of Kurdish women revolutionaries fighting in Rojava and beyond, or the ongoing struggle of the Zapatistas, which nurtured the imaginary of liberation. Furthermore, there is a new militancy of youth in environmental and radical strike movements across the world. For our purposes, we can also draw inspiration and excitement from some tendencies of political aesthetics. The latter has always played a pivotal role in creating a future imaginary, promoting figures and images of peace, justice and solidarity. Such art examples might “always already” contribute to “seeds of resistance”¹⁷ and promote alternative scripts, empowering images and figures of counter-histories and solidarities between unexpected figures of the oppressed, between human and non-human worlds. Evoking indigenous, feminist and antifascist imaginaries might here lead the way to re-appropriate the emancipatory past to open the future in a different way.

Kamerić’s intervention *Cease*: Of _ For What?

Šejla Kamerić’s work has been triggering strong reactions, as it is marked by a visually powerful aesthetic while oriented to provoke the sacred core of the unitarian communities and moral majority. With her famous works *Closing Border* (2002) and *Bosnian Girl* (2003), she warned that Yugoslav wars were not to be read as the Balkan powder keg resigned to eternal ethnical and religious animosities, a miniature of Huntington’s projection of the “clash of civilisation”, but as part of the new European order that helped the reunification process, exposed the internal grades of segregations and laid bare the complicity in genocide of the so-called international community. Kamerić’s new intervention called *Cease* comes during the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza but is also evocative of the increasing number of war conflicts, as this year has seen the highest number since the Second World War.¹⁸ Kamerić’s installation for the Venice Biennale (planned for the Sarajevo contemporary art collection) stands as a symbolic sculptural intervention in the centre of the square Campo Santo Stefano. It demonstrates the artist’s grave concern about the existing state of affairs, the protracted, complicit or even directly responsible role of the international and, especially, European community in *perpetual war*, where peace increasingly becomes

17 Amílcar Cabral, “National Liberation and Culture,” *Black Past*, published 10 August 2009, <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/1970-amilcar-cabral-national-liberation-and-culture/>.

18 The work was created on occasion of the 60th International Biennale Arte. Giulia Foscari, founder of UNA / UNLESS, curates “CEASE” in Campo Santo Stefano, a public art project by Bosnian Herzegovinian artist Šejla Kamerić. The artwork is commissioned by Ars Aevi Museum of Modern Art, see: “Exhibitions. CEASE”, UNA-UNLESS, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://una-unless.org/en/universeitem/cease>.

collateral damage rather than the desired goal of our world. Kamberić's gesture commands attention by dominating the central space of the square, drawing not only visitors attending the Biennale but also passers-by. Its monumental aesthetic is encapsulated in the minimalist arrangement of a monument: a pedestal, a red pole, and a white flag. Furthermore, the gesture and positioning of the white flag, occasionally fluttering in the blue sky, but at *half-mast*, incites our imagination to ask whether the time has finally come to pay respects and mourn the victims and the oppressed of all current wars. Does the customary gesture of lowering a flag to half-mast, a gesture traditionally employed by sovereigns to signify profound national mourning, prompt a sense of accountability? Can European governments, historically engaged not merely as bystanders but also as participants in wars, arms trade, the normalisation of warfare, occupation, and new Cold War geopolitics, be compelled to recognise their responsibility?



Šejla Kamberić's *Cease*, Venice Biennale. Photo courtesy of Aleksandra Vajd.

The three “ready-made” elements – the monumental form, white flag, and half-mast – do not simply indicate the acceptance of surrender of a supposedly weaker side to a stronger power, which would only evoke and affirm the patriarchal order of military domination. It also does not call for a mere truce, a humanitarian ceasefire, which would leave untouched the underlying conditions fostering future conflicts and wars. *Cease* is here not only a truce that further propels us into a long-awaited apocalypse and a realisation of the fascist desire for a global *clash of civilisations*. The artist's gesture is radical in that it extends an invitation to observe how, in the current European context, the principle and norm of peace have been buried. The *white flag* fluttering in the wind stands as a historical lament, mourning over the idea/l and politics of peace, which has completely vanished from the political imaginary of the established elites. Not without irony, the concept and politics of peace have been too often confined to the empty gestures of figures such as religious leaders calling for peace and appeasement, epitomised by pacifist moralists that target the bad consciousness instead of the deeper causes of conflicts and wars. Furthermore, peace has always been connected to power relations, and those who announced it were usually the victors of a war. In his major study of the emerging unification of (European) Christendom, Tomaž Mastnak lucidly showed how the millennial calls for peace, *pax Dei*, which made a peace movement to unite Christian leaders and “these peacemaking efforts together resulted in the crusade at the end of the eleventh century. A new kind of holy war grew out of the holy peace”.¹⁹

With this in mind today, we should urgently arrive at the point of “re-valuation” of the old sunken and already buried idea of peace. It is time to embrace peace not as a normative ideal but as a fundamental paradigm and alternative practice in education, economy and politics, as a social tie that promotes mutual aid and solidarity that ceases all exploitation, domination and wars. This is a peace that is not a truce or a mere interlude to new wars; in the name of such peace, we can start imagining new deals underpinned by social, racial and climate justice. The courage and capacity required to achieve a lasting peace will far surpass the waging of any war. To surrender the idea of war indefinitely. The supposed gesture of the weak, surrendering, actually politicises vulnerability and makes for a strong gesture of resistance. The sign of the *white flag* becomes the true wager of *Cease*, calling us to break the contemporary deadlock and also destabilise the neofascist ties of blood and ethnicity emblematised in a flag. As Henry Barbusse wrote in the trenches of the First World War:

No, I do not bow in presence of the flag. It frightens me, I hate it and I accuse it. No, there is no beauty in it; it is not the emblem of this corner of my native land, whose fair picture it disturbs with its savage stripes. It is the screaming signboard of the glory of blows, of militarism and war. It unfurls over the living

19 Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002), 1.

surges of humanity a sign of supremacy and command; it is a weapon. It is not the love of our countries, it is their sharp-edged difference, proud and aggressive, which we placard in the face of the others. It is the gaudy eagle which conquerors and their devotees see flying in their dreams from steeple to steeple in foreign lands. The sacred defense of the homeland – well and good. But if there was no offensive war there would be defensive war.²⁰

Nika Autor's *Sunny Railways*: From socialist utopia to dystopian present?²¹

I would like to present another female film author whose works span from exhibition to film, but who has, in the last decade, established herself as a front member of the collective Obzorniška fronta (Newsreels Front). This collective evokes the name of newsreels, connected to the early avant-garde, the Soviet and Yugoslav socialist legacy of early filmmakers intervening and documenting how socialism was built and what its major challenges were. How to intervene in our reality with filmmaking today? Moving between promoting utopian ideas and the official ideology of socialism of the past, the Newsreels Front uses a very engaged interventionist style in the present, covering topics of work, migrant work and migrations in the Balkan region. Documentarist and political dimensions of the work do not overwrite aesthetical and poetical approaches in the film work of Nika Autor. Her work skilfully navigates between the archives of the past, socialism, partially realised utopias, while also bringing us to the midst of the Balkan Route, where migrants await in suspension. Importantly, her films are not only some sensational investigations into the horrific circumstances of migrants – border control, police violence, absence of official infrastructure – but these film essays take us on the underground journey that displays the life and self-managed infrastructure of the migrants. They point to the political capacities of the oppressed, the silent and unknown solidarities between the newcomers and local populations. The camera operates with the expectation of the world that we found, that is already here, in Nika Autor's *Red Forest*. Without romanticising survival strategies, we need to take seriously the question of how to sustain self-management in our communities in resistance.

Her last film, called *Obzornik 242 – Sunčane pruge* (Newsreel 242 – *Sunny Railways*, 2023), investigates the early postwar period after the fascist occupation and destruction of the country. Much of the basic and industrial infrastructure had to be rebuilt. In this

period, there was much popular enthusiasm, and the film takes us closer to 1947, when international youth (brigades) joined Yugoslav youth volunteers and built – in a matter of months – a 242-kilometre-long railroad between Sarajevo and Šamac. The archival footage is accompanied by a voiceover and impressive comments that travel around and self-reflect on the question: what guided the youth in their internationalist spirit and solidarity? In retrospect, can one say that all the bodies of those working on the railroad expressed not only the idea of socialist utopia, but its material realisation? The film, however, does not indulge the spectator in the facile nostalgia that everything worked better back then. Rather, it makes us aware of a constant jumping between the temporality of utopia, of the shrinking time of war, and the expansion of a war-scarred landscape full of dead bodies. A specific site of the film, framing socialist internationalism, serves a narrative that indicates everything was possible and that these youth bodies carried open expectations into the future. Socialist internationalism failed historically to defeat the capitalist camp, but it succeeded, however fleetingly, in nurturing the ties between periphery and semi-periphery.



²⁰ Henri Barbusse, *Light* (Gutenberg project, 2004), 476–77. The book is available online: "Light by Henri Barbusse," Project Gutenberg, accessed on 18 January 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12904>

²¹ Nika Autor, *Sunny Railways*, 2023, Newsreel Front, 31 min.



Stills from *Sunny Railways*. Photo courtesy of Nika Autor.

The first part of the film departs from the landscape, a beautiful and mountainous landscape along which our eyes travel slowly. Absence of people, almost silence, juxtaposed with the wars and liberation movement that will see these mountains liberated. The camera accompanied by the voiceover recounts how the liberation forces fought their struggle for survival and against fascist occupiers. Those scattered battlefields, corpses and bones situated in the most beautiful of landscapes also harbour hope and utopia and, most of all, construction for the peace and prosperity of all nations and people of the new Yugoslavia. On the margin, a more dominant expression travels, the image of progress. This a more official presentation – where masses greet the then President Tito at the opening of the railroad track – amounting to the image of successful socialist industrialisation,

where popular enthusiasm clearly sees the future. Besides this, Autor engages with the internationalist spirit, something that cannot be reduced to state propaganda or forced and manipulated labour. Railroad construction here points to multiple conceptions of the future. The camera and the story stop at the image of a Palestinian woman working together with two other comrades. We cannot see her face or hear her voice, but the speculation takes us on a journey: only a year later, in 1948, the question of Palestine's future would end with the Nakba, the catastrophe for a large portion of the Palestinian people who were forcefully removed from their homes in the light of the creation of Israel.²² The recurring returns to the Palestinian woman who showed solidarity with Yugoslavia make us reflect on the subsequent ties and solidarity of Yugoslavia with the Palestinian people and its anticolonial struggle. The image of antifascist and anticolonial struggle is internally linked to the image of peace. We see people, young and old, happily working and building a new railroad that symbolises peace and sisterhood with other nations and people.

In the second part of the film, we come to the real wasteland of the postsocialist transition. This time, yet again, we find the landscape empty; there are practically no people, which resonates strongly with what Pavle Levi argues:

What is missing are, of course, the people (Deleuze) ... People – yes, but... not only the living. The dead, too, are missing! There is a manifest absence of human bodies, all human bodies, in these films. Bodies engaged in various activities, behaviours, and gestures, whether mundane or extraordinary.²³

Nature seems to exact revenge on people, their wars and horrific consequences: nature overgrows the railtracks. The images and archival footage of new wars are absent; we might wonder whether the image of ethnic wars is absent because it bears no emancipatory and utopian fragments? Furthermore, as Pavle Levi commented on various recent post-Yugoslav films that work on politics and landscape, they work carefully with slowing down and highlighting landscape poetics. For Levi, this is not mere aestheticisation, but rather, I would add, a politicisation of landscape that brings together a series of interconnected themes, “contemporary as well as historical; socio-economic, political, and cultural – themes ... every film image of a landscape is also a document of a particular way in which nature itself responds to human activity.”²⁴ In the case of Autor's most recent film, the once cherished landscape of liberation and internationalist efforts turns into a sad picture of the

²² For an insightful historical work on the beginnings of Israel and the ethnical cleansing and occupation of Palestine, see: Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnical Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld publications, 2016).

²³ Pavle Levi, “The Cinema of Cleansed Landscapes (On Image Politics after Yugoslavia),” *Senses of Cinema*, no. 103, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2022/after-yugoslavia/the-cinema-of-cleansed-landscapes-on-image-politics-after-yugoslavia/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

scattered bodies of new wars that hold almost fossilised remainders of the past. Can this railroad still present us with ways and traces to reactivate the internationalist spirit? The film gives us perhaps one clue on how to do this. It is not the more obvious overgrowing of the railtracks by nature that overgrows the utopian past, but instead the new movement along the tracks. Autor's camera-eye is focused on the newcomers who use these tracks along the so-called Balkan route. The camera stops on a group of female migrants/refugees of three different generations. Their portraits make it clear: they are all from Palestine. Might the oldest know her comrade who was in Yugoslavia in 1947, for she is surely one of the survivors of the Nakba? Then we see women from the middle generation, who must have well known the Intifada, the resistance movement that emerged in late 1987 in the Jabalia refugee camp and, finally, the youngest woman, who remembers their home, even if displaced or destroyed now, and will be the ones carrying these stories to the core of Europe.

In unfolding Autor's images and words, we could easily associate it with what Traverso calls "leftwing melancholia".²⁵ It does not travel along a nostalgic path that would construct a space that did not exist but rather transports us to a time when a vision of the future existed and was meaningful for many. It is a vital contribution to the archive of the oppressed that counters the right-wing dissident trope that the entire communist past can be reduced to propaganda and violence. Autor's film engages with an array of positive consequences, juxtaposing them with the ideological effects of a dystopian present. Where there is no future, the structure of feeling fills us with apathy and resignation. Furthermore, the film is very good at showing that when there is an absence of conditions and an absence of belief in the social transformative project, and where the internationalist spirit becomes reduced to NGO work, then we are left with only one possible future: militarisation of society, nationalisation of communities and proliferation of war. Sad, almost empty rails and train stations signify, as the voiceover says, "sad states" after the transition. The famous slogan – there is no alternative – of the transition period can be identified with the visual trope of ethnic war as the only paradigm of the future. War and its consequences are materialised in the lost railtracks and the movements of people escaping catastrophes.

In this film documentation, we do not deal directly with wars and manifested violence that would draw on the ordinary mediatised spectacle of images. Instead, Autor's camera makes those who flee subjects in their own right, dignified and in need of respect for what they have gone through. The camera stops and makes a close-up of the faces of the Palestinian women, not as mere passive victims for the Western gaze, but as those, as Judith Butler well articulates, who become a subject worthy of our collective mourning that can end oppressions.²⁶ Their lives matter and they are worthy of representation beyond

war victims. In the times where double standards reign supreme and the perpetrators' lives are becoming more worthy than those of the oppressed ideological grounds and battles for "people without history" and their own state become part of our de-normalisation of dystopia. Newsreel Front is one such attempt.

From truce to intersectional peace

What the new, and now no longer so new, Cold War division entertains and normalises is war. Banners and flags point to the race to the bottom, which is marked by anti-social and anti-ecological colours. Such war banners have no space or horizon of/for peace. There is only a temporary, if any, interval of truce. The stronger only seek opportunities to make a profit, to use the acquired (ethnic or other) advantage to prevail: To occupy, to extract resources and move on, no matter the cost. This script very much runs directly to the famous Article 6 of Immanuel Kant's treatise *Towards Perpetual Peace*. One of the major challenges today is to counter the idea that ceasefire, "eternal" peace, can be achieved only on the great graveyard of humanity, if taken in its radical sense, in a war of extermination. Kant is clear:

No state shall allow itself such hostilities in wartime as would make mutual trust in a future period of peace impossible. Such acts would include the employment of assassins (*percussores*), poisoners (*venefici*), breach of surrender, incitement of treason (*perduellio*) [...] [I]t is clear that the means named above would inevitably lead to such a war of extermination, since once they were used, such diabolical arts, malicious in themselves, would not long hold themselves within the boundaries of war, as for instance with the use of spies (*uti exploratoribus*), where only the dishonorableness of others (which can never be fully eliminated) is used; instead, these malicious practices would be carried over into peacetime and thus destroy its purpose altogether.²⁷

Instead of accelerating this present into a future that annihilates our alleged enemies as fast as possible, to continue producing and consuming more, and then destroying at an ever-growing rate, Kameron's *Cease* calls to interrupt this flow of inflationist commerce: To cease (with) means here to stop the normalisation of war and its steady course to apocalypse. What is today much more revolutionary than being faster and more engaged in the established institutions is the drive and enthusiasm to stop, to cease collaborating

²⁵ Enzo Traverso, *Left-wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

²⁶ Judith Butler, "Rethinking vulnerability and resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12–28.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2006), 70–71.

in its institutions. As Walter Benjamin once stated: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers - namely, the human race - to activate the emergency brake”.²⁸ To activate the emergency brake. And to lower the white flag to half-mast; to draw attention to where nobody is supposed to look and keep watching and acting on it.

Kamerić’s *Cease* makes us reflect deeper on the pitfalls of the current predicament that keeps tolerating genocides, sharing with Nika Autor’s film its deep critique of nationalist revisionism. To compartmentalise, marginalise and police bodies of the oppressed according to their gender, ethnicity, class and race. Autor’s film recovers internationalist solidarity and invites us to rethink what the real conditions of lasting peace would be. The film points to thinking together, after the loss of the once common space of internationalism, connected to the loss of emancipatory ideas and utopias dissolved by plural wars. It does not only cultivate defeat but also evokes the victories of the oppressed, even if in the past. Perhaps one open question remains: if, in the moment when the scattered landscape becomes reorganised on the public railroad tracks and dissolves into migration and scattered bodies hovering around the landscape, can we still trace a certain projective position to the future? Do we, today, need to always first make a detour through the utopian past, or can one build new internationalist figures and movements that carry justice and peace directly in the present? Glimpses of hope that carry the message of peace in times of global war? Perhaps we should toast to the idea and practice of peace that is intersectional. Pacifist claims go hand-in-hand with disarmament and radical measures to cut pollution. There will be new figures and visions of resistance, which will be greatly indebted to women’s, indigenous and antifascist struggles of the past and future.

Kamerić’s and Autor’s works evoke a deeply transgenerational dimension, which connects diverse witnesses, artworks, and us spectators in socialism and post-socialism, and incites us to reflect, act and renegotiate with the existing order, with the dangers of environmental collapse and growing fascist danger of the age of the Capitalocene. Let me return at the end to the Yugoslav Partisans in the midst of the Second World War: When the fascist occupation and a lurking death were omnipresent, we find the partisans liberating territories and organising the local population. The Partisans wrote and sang poems and songs, including, despite being amid a war, various antimilitarist songs of freedom. I want to conclude with a poem entitled “Fighter to a Girl”, written in 1943 by the Partisan poet Karel Destovnik-Kajuh (1922–1944):

In this poem there will be a passionate desire,
To grab this damn life by its neck.
This poem will be the poem of millions,
This poem will be the struggle,
Because it grew from my blood,
Because it grew out of dead bones.
From the ultimate struggle when people were killed.²⁹

When will this poem that announces real peace arrive?

Summary

The article departs from a critical diagnosis that investigates how such a major normalisation of war took place in recent times, in what forms and with what means. The first part of the article tackles the early period after 1989 and focuses on the (post-) Yugoslav transition as a paradigmatic case of catastrophic transition, full of morbid and violent dimensions of what Marx called the “primitive accumulation of capital”. The text analyses a few dominant images and figures of history that shrank the future horizon or even normalised the narrative that there is no alternative and that curtailing of now normal political rights, war and ecological catastrophes will become a normal part of our situation. However, the gist of the article defends the need and desire for the (re)invention of a new peace paradigm linked to the issues of environmental, racial and social justice. In the second part of the article, I take a closer look at the field of political aesthetics and focus on two inspiring artists/artworks from the post-Yugoslav context. Each in their own way, they were able to demonstrate the central violent mechanisms and their indirect and direct consequences for the Balkans. Šejla Kamerić’s and Nika Autor’s works create counter-images to violence and war. Their works intervene in the international context, which aims to spread beyond the artistic world and might trigger a reactivation of the emancipatory legacy of the past (Autor) and internationalism or help nurture the figure/image of peace (Kamerić). Beyond the empty gesture or normative idea of “perpetual peace”, any politics of peace will need to incite an imaginary that holds emancipatory promise for a future that can sustain peace. This peace is genuinely intersectional, that is, connected to claims of social and environmental justice.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1938–1940*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 402.

²⁹ Translation mine. Karel Destovnik Kajuh, “Borec dekletu,” in *Partizanske*, ed. Boris Paternu et al. (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga and Partizanska knjiga, 1995), 334.

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