

Escalation and Collapse

Outside the actual war zones, we live in a warlike peace, our bodies settled in peace, our minds among bombs and rubble. We attack an enemy with words, who threatens us in return, but we sleep in our own beds, not in a shelter.

And yet we are participating in the real war without having entered it by bringing in weapons and ammunition.

The war in Ukraine has been progressively internationalized. Humanitarian aid and then food aid to the Ukrainian people, victims of Russian aggression, has been followed by military aid in the form of weapons, first defensive and then counter-offensive, the quality and quantity of which are increasing mainly due to the massive contribution of the United States, accompanied by those of most European Union countries.

The strategy of the Russian army is relentless. It is the daughter of Zhukov's strategy during the Second World War, which gave the leading role to formidable artillery bombardments, not only against the enemy army, but also against the cities to be taken, with the last one being the total crushing by heavy artillery of the capital of the Reich, Berlin. Like any victorious army, but more terribly with the Soviet advance in Germany, killings and rapes multiplied. We knew it then, but we were careful not to denounce them, explaining them as revenge for the enormous suffering and death inflicted by Nazi Germany on the Soviet population.

In the case of Ukraine, whose people are brothers or at least close cousins of the Russians, one wonders if the killings and rapes are due to the disorder of some troops, to the fury of failure, or to a will to terrorize.

We still don't know if the first intention of Putin's aggression was to make the whole of Ukraine fall like a low-hanging fruit by decapitating it with the first assaults. It seems that the current ambition, under pressure from Ukrainian resistance, is to permanently conquer the predominantly Russian-speaking regions of the Donbass and the Azov Sea coast. At the time of writing, the struggle is fierce and uncertain: the Russian offensive is very powerful, but the Ukrainian army, in the course of its war since 2014 against the Russian-speaking separatists, has

established entrenched and staggered fortifications, which so far have considerably slowed down the Russian advances, themselves still not very decisive.

Barring a coup d'état in the Kremlin or a fatal military coup or a diplomatic feat (ceasefire, peace compromise), it now seems that the war is likely to last and intensify with the increasingly abundant supply of Western weapons and Russia's increasingly extensive retaliation. The international character of the war in Ukraine is growing. It is true that the Western camp led by the United States declares that it is not at war with Russia. But its military intervention in Ukraine is an indirect war, to which is added an economic war increased by the imposition of sanctions.

We are in the middle of an escalation, maintained by new bombings, new mutual accusations, new waves of reciprocal criminalization; the indirect war included in the war in Ukraine can at any moment be widened by bombings, accidental or not, in Russian or European territory.

On top of that, Putin has resumed his announcement of a "lightning fast" retaliation if a certain unspecified threshold of hostility or interference threatens Russia, mentioning a decisive weapon, unknown to any other country and which Russia alone might possess.

Based on a seemingly rational argument, well known since the Cold War, this threat is not taken seriously by the United States and its allies. If Russia wants to annihilate us, an immediate retaliation would in turn annihilate Russia. This rational argument, however, does not take into account a possible mishap and a possible irrationality. The possible mishap would be the unintentional launch of a nuclear device at the potential enemy, which would trigger an immediate nuclear response. The possible irrationality is that of a dictator in a rage or delirium.

In any case, it is currently probable (knowing also that the improbable can happen) that from one slip to another the war will spread to European territories, and will be amplified by intercontinental missiles on Russian and American territories without sparing Europe. A third world war, of a new type, using tactical nuclear weapons with limited range, drones, and cyberwarfare to destroy the communication systems that sustain the life of societies would be the logical outcome of the amplification of the current internationalized war.

Let's add an important observation: in countries in conflict, war introduces controls, surveillance, the elimination of any opinion deviating from the official line, and the unleashing of propaganda for the permanent justification of its acts and the ontological criminalization of the enemy. Putin's Russia was already an authoritarian state under the orders of a dictator. The war has intensified control and repression, hitting those who not only opposed the aggression, but also those who questioned its rationale. In Ukraine, the hunt for spies and terrorists has given rise to a control of the population. The excesses committed by some of its troops or by bandits are hidden, and while denouncing real abuses, propaganda is unleashed against a totally criminalized enemy. In France, although not belligerent and still enjoying the ultimate comforts of peace, we only have access to the most misleading assertions of Putin's Russia and to the images of the destruction it causes. And Russian artists and athletes are banned in a hysteria that confuses a great culture, a great people, and its current leader.

We are caught in an escalation of inhumanity and a collapse of humanity, an escalation of simplistic thinking and a collapse of complexity. But above all, the escalation towards globalized war signals the tumbling of humanity towards the abyss.

Can we escape from this infernal logic?

The only alternative would be a compromise peace that would establish and guarantee the neutrality of Ukraine. The status of the Russian-speaking regions of Donbass could be dealt with by referendum. The status of Crimea, a Tatar region partly Russianized, would deserve a special status. In short, the conditions for a compromise, however difficult it may be to establish, are clear. But the radicalization and the amplification of the war has set back the possibilities in an undefined way. The geo-political position of Ukraine and its economic wealth in wheat, steel, coal, and rare metals make it a prey for the two great predator superpowers. The tilting of Ukraine towards the West after Maidan has aroused Russian aggression and the Russian aggression has aroused not only the support of a nation victimized by invasion, but also the will to integrate it into the West, which corresponds moreover to the wish of a majority of Ukrainians

Ukraine is a martyr not only of Russia but of the worsening of the conflictual relations between the United States and Russia, including of course the enlargement of NATO, itself inseparable from the concerns raised by the Russian war in Chechnya and its military intervention in Georgia.

The salvation of Ukraine would be not only to free itself from the Russian invasion, but also to free itself from the antagonism between Russia and the United States.

This double liberation would also allow the nations of the European Union to free themselves from this conflict and to seek to link security and autonomy.

One cannot know up to what point the sanctions against Russia, while hitting hard not only the Putin regime, but also the Russian people, will also hit the sanctioners by turning partially back on them: it is not only the latter's supply of energy and food that is threatened; with increased inflation and the restrictions to come, their entire economies and social life will undoubtedly be hard hit. An economic crisis always in itself generates authoritarian regressions and the durable installation of societies of submission.

Putin's Russia is an abominable authoritarian regime. But it is not comparable to Hitler's Germany; its pan-Slavic hegemonism is not, as was Hitler's, the will to colonize Europe and to enslave racially inferior peoples. Any Hitlerization of Putin is unwarranted.

We are in a world dominated by antagonisms between superpowers and given over to ethnic, nationalist, racist, and religious delusions.

However repugnant the superpowers may be in various ways, the appeasement of their conflicts is a sine qua non to avoid generalized disasters. So we must aspire to a compromise. Humanity would not be saved for all that; but it would gain a reprieve, and perhaps also a hope.

Edgar Morin

translated by Sean Kelly