

Elephant Archives

Towards Anarchist Antimilitarism

Alfredo M. Bonanno

Alfredo M. Bonanno
Towards Anarchist Antimilitarism
1982

First published in English in *Insurrection* 1982

archive.elephanteditions.net

1982

The theme of war has been present in almost every kind of publication in recent months, including anarchist ones. War is approaching, it is about to break out, the two great international blocks are moving towards war: we must do everything we can to prevent the world from being completely annihilated through a mad impulse of those who govern us.

But as often happens when a problem sets off a complex reaction of sentiment and fear in our intimate beings, we have not been capable — or so it seems to me — of going into it deeply enough.

In fact, when we prepare to fight an enemy that is threatening us we must ask ourselves what that enemy intends to do so that a maximum amount of information allows us to retaliate, defend ourselves and go to the counter-attack. So, it seems to me, we have not asked ourselves the fundamental question: *what is war?* We have not done so because we all believe, one way or another, that we know perfectly well what war is, so we are quite capable of doing whatever is necessary to fight those intending to bring it about.

In actual fact our ideas are not all that clear. That even the bourgeois press does not have clear ideas on the subject matters little because it is certainly not from there that we will find what we need to produce the minimum analysis required to make our actions coherent and meaningful.

Reading most anarchist publications is like reading revised and corrected editions of the progressive bourgeois press, when not some international law review with a few alterations in the language and a little more naivety in outlook.

The vagueness of bourgeois ideas is quite understandable: for the managers of dominion war is the means of guaranteeing its continuation, at least within certain limits. But for those who oppose it, what does war mean?

For the bosses war is nothing other than the accentuated use of the means they have always used. Armies exist, there are bombs, weapons too. Wars have continually been in course and are still breaking out here and there according to a geography and logic that in some way corresponds to the rules of the development and survival of capitalism. For the bosses there is no great problem to be solved. They *cannot begin to wage war for the simple reason that they have never stopped waging it*. On the other hand, for those who intend to fight against it things are different in that their struggle is spread through a series of interventions and actions that are valid in relation to their understanding of the phenomenon of war.

This in turn is determined by their own class interests, their limited knowledge of social and political phenomena, ideological interpretations of reality and so on and this in a situation such as the present where one is speaking of the possibility (we do not know how near or how far) of a nuclear war that is capable of destroying everything and everyone in the space of a few seconds.

In theory everyone should be against war, especially the kind that is possible today as we would all be exposed to the prospect of annihilation. How then can it be explained that this is not so? How can it be explained that governments find supporters and executors of their so-called madness? It can be explained through the very simple and fundamental fact of class in the same way. Clearly many of those who are near the levers of power and closest to the exploitation of the bosses, if not bosses or holders of power themselves, overcome the fear of war through the prospect of increasing their own privileges.

Hence the excogitations that these people are producing in their newspapers and programmes that all reflect the desire to see war as something immediate. I am not saying that this is not possible but rather that we should not accept this conclusion ourselves but through our analyses demystify the swindles supplied by the organs of power.

So we come back to the fundamental question: what is war? The publications currently on the market on the subject, including our own papers, often turn out to be mere hangers on or amplifiers of the propaganda of the regime when they say that war is near. Then it is stated that, given that war is imminent, we must do everything we can to prevent it because anarchists have always been against war and because war is a great calamity that strikes everybody, it does not have victors but only victims, and constitutes a great crime against humanity.

Beautiful and profoundly humanitarian arguments with only one defect: they do not move the State's programmes of genocide an inch and say nothing new to anybody. Let us make an hypothesis that corresponds to what has happened in the past and which once infected some of the anarchists of the best intellectual tradition (i.e. Kropotkin and the Manifesto of the Sixteen). As we have said we are all against war (in words!). Even the most convinced supporters of the virtues of armed solutions to State conflicts *never* have the courage to say so openly, apart from a few delirious maniacs, immediately rebuffed by their more cautious and shrewd collaborators. Those preparing for war are always the most impassioned propagandists of peace. Moreover, they base their peace propaganda on the fact that it is necessary at all costs to do everything possible to save the values of civilization, values which systematically come to be threatened by what is happening in the field of the adversary. (The adversary, in turn, acts and operates in the same way.) We must do everything to prevent war and often people end up convinced that doing everything can even mean going to war in order to avoid a greater catastrophe. At the outbreak of the first "world" war, Kropotkin, Grave, Malato and other illustrious anarchists reached the conclusion that it was necessary to participate in the war in order to defend democracy (in the first place French) under the threat of the central empires (Germany in the first place). This tragic error was possible and always will be so, because the same mistake as that which is being

made today was made: they did not develop an anarchist analysis, but had faith in an anarchist re-elaboration of the analysis supplied by the intellectuals and divulggers in the service of the bosses. From that it was easy for them to reach the conclusion that, although war was still an immense and terrible tragedy, it was preferable to the more serious damage that might result from the victory of Teutonic militarism. Certainly not all anarchists were blind to the serious deviations of Kropotkin and comrades; Malatesta reacted violently, writing from London, but the damage done caused not inconsiderable consequences in the anarchist movement all over the world.

Today, in the same way, many anarchist comrades do not stop at the unpardonable superficialities that can be read in some of our papers and reviews. But let us for a moment go back to the generalizations that abound in our analysis. It is certainly not enough to appeal to universal brotherhood, humanity, peace, the values of civilization, in order to mobilize the forces that are really prepared to fight the State.

Otherwise why, when dealing with problems relative to the social and economic clash in a specific sense (unemployment, housing, schools, hospitals, etc.) do we avoid resorting to such banalities? Now that we are concerning ourselves with war we are suddenly authorized perhaps to let ourselves fall to the level of the generalizations of the radical humanists?

The fact is that we resort to these commonplaces with fear as the common denominator because we do not know what to do or say, nor what in reality — in the present situation of power in Italy, Europe or the world — the phenomenon of war really is.

Panic-stricken by our incapacity, profoundly aware that neither our glorious anti-militarist tradition (with the above exception), or the whole just as glorious baggage of anarchist ideas, can save us, we have recourse to the analytical laboratories of power. And so we transform ourselves into dilettante scholars of international problems. Our journals fill their pages with reflections, comical to say the least, on the relationship between the US and the USSR, between the NATO and the Warsaw pact, between the Middle Eastern countries and Europe; economic problems intersect with military strategies; technical data relative to the A, H, N, bombs find their way into our pages (and heads, having the effect of psychological propaganda). Great confusion results, giving the true measure of how far we are from the reality of the struggle and how much each of our attempts to get closer takes us away from the target. So we become ostentatious. We insist on constructing our analysis with more and more data borrowed from the State-produced manuals and we explain to the people with fear as the central point of the argument. We do not realize that in so doing we are becoming functional to that part of the bosses' alignment that plays precisely on fear to obtain two fundamental results: to divert the exploited masses from the increasingly heavy exploitation that awaits them and prepare them,

These questions may not be shared by many comrades, but they remain before us as so many points that require going into and discussing. It is not enough to deny them, shrug our shoulders and carry on.

In our opinion it is necessary to go into the general conditions of the class conflict today and re-examine the function that anarchists can develop within the conflict itself, either as a specific movement or as an organizational force capable of expressing itself within the general movement of the exploited. It is urgent that we single out our weaknesses immediately and without half measures, without the persistence of our old paranoia, the stagnant ideologizing that pollutes many sectors of our movement, the social democratic infiltration, respectability, hesitation in the face of action, the craze for *a priori* judgements and ecclesiastical closure, the aristocratic residual that made us consider ourselves the monotonous carriers of truth.

To analyze to the extreme consequences our effective possibility of struggle does not at all mean to take a distance from the problem of war, and we shall be able to give a far more precise and meaningful response, a far more detailed indication and project of intervention, than what is happening at the present time, which sees us only as suppliers of rehashed theories of the bourgeoisie and vulgar distributors of a humanitarian maximalism which can be shared by all and precisely for this reason no one is disposed to support.

Moreover, in addressing our efforts towards the reorganization of the movement and the realization of what is necessary to overcome this reflux, we will avoid limiting our discourse simply to that of fear of war, which by its vagueness and generality constantly runs the risk of falling into interclassism.

We should not forget that our evaluations of a problem — and war is no exception — often depend on the objective conditions in which we find ourselves personally and of those of the movement in general.

why not, for war. Let us not forget that the best way to push the masses towards acceptance of war is through spreading the fear of war. Tomorrow, with a few adjustments in the regime's propaganda, this fear of war will easily transform itself into the will and desire to accept a circumscribed war in order to prevent total war, and who knows whether a new Kropotkin will appear (from among the many neo-Kropotkinians who infest our pages) and support the need for the small war in the face of the total one. (After all "small is beautiful").

Of course, we anarchists are against all wars, big or small as they might be, but once we limit ourselves to basing our argument exclusively or fundamentally on fear we place ourselves at the extreme left of capital, supplying it with the opening it needs to attenuate the dissent that is automatically produced within the mass of exploited.

Moreover, once we fully develop our critique of total atomic war and show — thus becoming the mouthpieces of the extreme left of capital — how terrible the effects of every kind and level of atomic bomb are, and once we add, as a simple corollary, that we are not only against atomic war but against every kind of war between States because all war is genocide, an abominable misdeed, a crime against humanity, and so on, with similar commonplaces we become extremely contradictory and damaging. In fact, we supply well-founded, scientific and concrete elements against atomic war (because these are supplied by capital itself), but limit ourselves to the usual humanitarian commonplaces as far as non-atomic war is concerned, involuntarily pushing the people (who are rightly repelled by humanitarian commonplaces) to predisposing themselves towards a refusal of atomic war and a probable acceptance of the "small war". And who knows whether it is not precisely this that capital wants of us.

However, because our good faith certainly cannot be doubted, it only remains to go more deeply into the argument and ask ourselves whether we should not develop our anti-war propaganda better.

And here we come back to the initial problem: we do not really know what war is. Because at the moment in which we start to go into the problem we realize that war constitutes but one particular moment in the overall strategy of exploitation that is put into act by capital.

Let us explain better. For States there exist formal aspects that scan the difference between *state of war* and *state of peace* at the level of international law. It is obvious that this type of differentiation cannot be of any interest to anarchists, who to understand a *real state of war* must certainly not wait for State A, through its diplomacy, to consign a declaration of war to State B. The task of anarchists is principally that of breaking up, as far as possible and for as long as possible, the formal curtain that States pull over the eyes of the people in order to exploit them and lead them to the slaughter. To do that, therefore, we cannot wait for the formalities of international law to be worked out, we

must be ahead of the times and denounce the *real situation of war* in act even when no officially declared state of war exists.

To tell the truth, the suspicion that it is not possible to establish a net frontier between war and peace exists among the theoreticians of oppression themselves. In his time even Clausewitz felt obliged to develop an analysis of war as the *continuation of politics with other means*. In the same way, contemporary scholars (Bouthoul, Aron, Sereni, Fornari, etc.) have become aware of the problem and have tried to put together the elements that allow an even minimal differentiation between state of war and state of peace. After the examination of the elements characterised by armed conflict, the mass phenomena and the tension used by public opinion — elements not specific to a state of war — these scholars have had to conclude that what characterizes war is its judicial character and that this judicial character comes to be atypical compared to the judicial structure that normally regulates belligerent States in “times of peace”. In other words war comes to be characterized by the legitimization of murder by a judiciary which in times of “peace” permits neither murder nor massacre.

From this we can clearly see that the criteria that distinguish war from peace are not ones which can be considered valid by anarchists. We are not willing to accept that the state of war formally declared by State power is indispensable in order to distinguish, denounce and attack a real situation of war. And, on its side, the State well knows that the formal aspect of the “declaration” of war only supplies a simple judicial alibi for a widening of the death process which it normally carries out by the specific character of its mere existence.

The State is an instrument of exploitation and death; therefore it is an instrument of war. To say State is to say war. There is no such thing as States at war and States at peace. States that want war and States that want peace do not exist. All States, by the simple fact of their existence, are instruments of war. To convince ourselves of this and to overcome the objection of whoever accuses us of maximalism or wants to see a difference at all costs where there is nothing but uniformity, it is enough to remember the obvious fact that it will certainly not be the number of deaths, the means used, the field of combat, or the warriors’ aims to mark a difference between state of war and state of peace. To systematically kill a dozen workers each day at the workplace is a phenomenon of war which as far as we are concerned differs only numerically from the deaths that amass in thousands on the battlefield. Behind this profile it is not possible to single out a real situation of peace under the capitalist regime, but only the fictitious state of peace which in practice is equal to a real situation of war.

We therefore establish that war is a State activity which does not characterize a transitory and circumscribed period of its action but has been the very essence of its structure for as long as we know during the whole course of exploitation. So the social-democratic illusions of unilateral disarmament,

respectable pacifism and bourgeois nonviolence collapse. Whoever supports pacifist theories and uses them to prevent the State from waging war is substantially a warrior himself, a reactionary who supports the State’s continual state of war, preferring it to another state of war which is considered different but which is substantially the same, being in practice no more than an extension of the conflict already in act.

This explains how the parties in government and those who have betrayed the workers’ ideals or who nurture the humanitarian whims of the radical bourgeoisie can, with great impudence or through stupid ignorance of reality, make great speeches against war. In practice, theirs are the speeches that guarantee the constitution of real war, preparing the masses for the acceptance of a future (always possible) extension of the small war in order to avoid a larger one which is postponed to infinity while the objective state of conflict is maintained and developed.

These concepts should be — and basically they are — more or less accepted by all anarchists. But, as it seems from many articles published over the past few months in our press, it is too easy when on the subject of war to slip into a dimension that sees it as something that can be avoided or which alone can be considered a form of struggle capable of coalizing the revolutionary forces.

It has been said that suddenly, out of the blue, we have come to find ourselves faced with the danger of world conflict far greater than could have been imagined in the past. It has been said that we must do something right away to prevent the world war that is approaching, against the increase in atomic weapons by both the US and the USSR. It has been said that there are moments in the life of a people or a continent where social, economic and political problems come to be superior to far more pressing and superior needs, referring to absolute categories such as survival, frontist opposition and raving homicidal hegemony, etc...

It is all very well to fight against war, militarism, bombs, armies, generals, missile bases. But if the reason is that it is the only level of intervention that the anarchist movement possesses, and that all other interventions are impossible, we must ask ourselves what is happening. It is not enough to throw oneself headlong into the only activity that remains open to us because we have difficulty in other sectors. We should ask ourselves whether the acceptance of the theme of war and the inability to place this theme within the specific logic of the State is not perhaps a consequence of our incapacity to address ourselves towards the real struggles in act? And whether in burying our heads in the sands of our weakness and facing the problem of the struggle against war without a minimum of militant structure, we are not running the risk of becoming the fanciful carriers of a maximalist ideology that ends up being convenient to the State?