

The Antinomies of the Russia-Ukraine War and Its Challenges to Feminist Theory

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The article analyzes responses to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine by philosophers on the left, like Balibar and Žižek, and feminist philosophers, such as Butler and Hark. A large-scale war in Europe proved to be a challenge for a number of feminist, pacifist, and leftist certainties, and this challenge was presented in philosophy and feminist theory as a series of antinomies that do not imply a simple solution. Some leading contemporary philosophers believe that Ukraine should stop resisting aggression in the face of the threat of a world nuclear war or if the conflict turns into a war of extermination. An alternative solution was suggested by some left and feminist philosophers who argued that a true Ukrainian victory over an authoritarian aggressor would amount to preserving and empowering democracy in Ukraine, and that this was possible only on the basis of building broad transnational anti-Putin alliances, including alliances with the representatives of all forces opposing Putin in Russia and Belarus.

Keywords: antinomies of the Russia-Ukraine war, war of extermination, feminism, nationalism, transnationalism, solidarity

1. Solidarity and disagreements in feminism in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, feminists from different parts of the world did not remain silent: they immediately condemned Russian aggression and declared their solidarity with Ukraine. There were both individual statements and collective manifestos signed by hundreds of feminist activists and scholars. These were followed by numerous anti-war collective actions, pickets, and international conference in support of Ukraine and Ukrainian feminists, in which feminists from around the world took part. Transnational feminists have become an important part of the volunteer movement in support of emigrants from Ukraine's

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endangered regions. And looking back at the events of the spring of 2022, we can say that a truly mass feminist anti-militarist mobilization took place.

Yet within this international feminist mobilization, considerable disagreements quickly emerged between the feminists from different parts of the world, and, above all, between the Ukrainian and the Eastern European feminists, on the one hand, and a number of feminists from Western Europe and other Western countries, on the other hand. These disagreements revolved around how to stop the Russia-Ukraine war and what strategies of resistance to militarism are appropriate and effective for feminists today.

The most contested issues in the international feminist community were (a) feminist strategies of non-violent resistance to militaristic violence and (b) feminist criticisms of the Western military-industrial complex and the corresponding militaristic policies of NATO. When the “Feminist Resistance Against War Manifesto” was published in March 2022, the authors stated that they “profoundly condemn the military invasion led by the Putin regime in Ukraine”, but at the same time condemned the role of NATO in the conflict, which, according to the authors, “is co-responsible for the situation created by its global expansionism and militaristic security narrative” and so they “reject the decisions that involve adding more weapons to the conflict and increasing war budgets” (Feminist Resistance Against War. A Manifesto 2022).

Shortly thereafter, a group of Ukrainian feminists associated with the Ukrainian socialist resource, *Commons*, saw in this position a manifestation of abstract pacifism and an ignorance of the Ukrainian political and cultural context, accusing the authors and signatories of the “Feminist Resistance Against War Manifesto” of “denying Ukrainian women this right to resistance, which constitutes a basic act of self-defense of the oppressed” and showing insufficient attention “to the voices of those directly affected by imperialist aggression” (Right to Resist. A Feminist Manifesto 2022).

As the organizer of the Ukrainian feminist resource, “Gender in Detail”, Tamara Zlobina wrote of the aforementioned manifesto and similar statements: “None of the “sisters” thought to consult Ukrainian feminists when writing these calls (and where Ukrainians accidentally read them before publication and criticized them, their voices were simply ignored)” (Zlobina 2022).

Some Western feminists who took a pacifist position regarding the Russia-Ukraine war demanded halting the supply of weapons to Ukraine. This stance was condemned by a number of feminist researchers from Ukraine and Eastern Europe as “Westernized” or a kind of “Westplaining” analogously to mansplaining (Johnson 2023). In fact, some Ukrainian and East European feminists even characterize this “Westplaining” as colonial

and a form of *epistemic imperialism*, that is, “the hubris of believing that what one knows or studies from a privileged perspective, as within the Anglophone academy, can be exported wholesale to contexts about which one knows little or nothing” (Burlyuk 2022).

Most Ukrainian feminists also strongly disagree with the Western feminist critique of the ideology and politics of nationalism as patriarchal, misogynist, and militaristic. Specifically, Ukrainian feminists argue that such a critical assessment of ideology and nationalism is true only for the ideology and nationalism of the colonialist countries and their “imperial nationalism”, but it is not suitable for the nationalism of the colonized peoples who rely on the politics of nationalism in their just struggle for their national independence and who therefore have the right to assert their “emancipatory nationalism” (Hendl 2022, 79).

As the Ukrainian feminist activist and a Coordinator of Gender Program at Kyiv Office of Heinrich Boell Foundation Anna Dovgopol wrote in response to the calls for not a nationalist, but transnational feminist solidarity with Ukrainian feminists: “It is time for the West for take down its’ white coat and listen to the “developing world”. And take time to think why they as Westerners have the privilege to denounce nationalism” (Dovgopol 2022).

That said, Ukrainian feminists, including those who positioned themselves as pacifists, have concluded that it is necessary to rethink the concept of militarism in the context of Ukraine’s need for armed resistance against Russian aggression (Sasunkevich 2024, 371). Ukrainian feminism today, with its reevaluation of militarism, is defined as what “women do in the Ukrainian army” (Zabuzhko 2024) when your country is confronted with war understood in the sense of an existential or total war.

The notion of total war means the conflict also extends to the sphere of culture. That’s why Ukrainian feminists as a rule refuse to cooperate with the feminists and cultural representatives of the “aggressor countries” (Russia and Belarus) and refuse to participate in the joint meetings and actions, even if they are organized to support Ukraine and all its participants are dissidents of their authoritarian regimes (Zherebkina et al. 2022, 6). In fact, many Ukrainian feminists consider any public statement by Russian feminists about the situation in Ukraine, even those condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine and expressing support of the oppressed, as unacceptable, since their speech is the speech of the oppressors and “dilutes Ukrainian voices, making them vague and incomprehensible” (Huseinova 2023).

As it turned out, many Western feminists hadn’t anticipated such sharp criticism and such a nationalistically marked understanding of anti-militarism and feminist solidarity. In fact, an online meeting “Transnational Feminist Solidarity with Ukrainian Feminists” organized by Judith

Butler, Sabine Hark, and myself on 09 May 2022 exposed a number of significant disagreements between transnational feminists in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, including: (a) disagreements due to the East-West divide, spearheaded by participants representing Central and Eastern Europe; (b) disagreements between a feminist ethics of non-violence and feminist arguments in defense of women's discourses and practices of violence and revenge; and (c) disagreements between transnationalism and nationalism (Zherebkina et al. 2022, 5–6). As Hark states, this war “challenges feminist, pacifist and leftist certainties” and demands a re-questioning of “what is transnational, feminist, reparative solidarity in times of war?” And then she asks, “if pacifism has recognizably failed, does this mean that solidarity should now be militaristic? And nationally oriented?” (Hark 2022, 18).

2. Western philosophy on antinomies of the Russia-Ukraine war

The disagreements within feminist scholarship sketched above resemble what the late Jacques Derrida called a situation of *undecidability*, where no rational and ethical choice is possible or where choice is possible only in the form of a paradoxical forced choice. Undecidability in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war was not restricted to feminist scholars alone. Some contemporary political philosophers who were reflecting on the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine also formulated their statements about the war in terms of undecidable antinomies, which can be called the antinomies of war.

Jürgen Habermas, for instance, formulated the situation of undecidable antinomies that Western civilization faced in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the following way:

- (1) Ukraine must not lose. This is due to the fact that, “were the allies to simply leave Ukraine to its fate, it wouldn't just be a scandal from a political-moral perspective, it would also be counter to the West's interests.” (Habermas 2022)
- (2) Putin must not lose. Putin cannot be driven into a corner, because then he will be able to launch a nuclear strike not only on Ukraine but also on NATO countries. Therefore, Putin's defeat means a world nuclear war and the death of all mankind. (Habermas 2022)

Similarly, and somewhat surprisingly, Habermas' constant critic, Slavoj Žižek, believed the Russia-Ukraine war involved the terror of undecidability or a forced choice:

We are faced with an impossible choice: if we make compromises to maintain peace, we are feeding Russian expansionism, which only a “demilitarization” of all of Europe will satisfy. But if we endorse full

confrontation, we run the high risk of precipitating a new world war.
(Žižek 2022)

So, according to Habermas and Žižek, the political situation of the Russia-Ukraine war seemingly amounts to an undecidable dead-end, like Kant's antinomies. But contemporary philosophers, unlike Kant, did not give up in the face of these antinomies and they went on to offer various options for overcoming the undecidabilities of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Among them is the famous critic of militarism and pacifist Noam Chomsky, who believes that Ukrainians and the rest of the world should accept Putin's demands, since "we stupidly missed the opportunity to influence Putin in peacetime" and, by suppressing their feelings of outrage at the war criminal Putin, come to terms with the sad reality that this is the only way to avoid World War III (Chomsky 2022). Although this assessment may seem extreme, Chomsky's position is in fact close to that of Habermas, who offers a more sophisticated strategy to confront the Putin regime, which he calls an "informed balanced approach and [that involves] weighing the risks" (Habermas 2022).

According to Habermas, this is precisely the strategy that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is pursuing when he insists on a politically justified balancing act between the defeat of Ukraine and the escalation of a limited conflict into World War III: Ukraine must not lose, but we must carefully weigh each step of military support, to prevent Putin from acting as if Germany and other NATO countries have officially entered the war (Habermas 2022). In his later publications, Habermas continues to develop this idea, proposing to seek a solution to the antinomy of the war in Ukraine via negotiations that would allow finding a compromise that will save face for both sides despite their diametrically opposed demands (Habermas 2023). Is this strategy of negotiation and settlement that feminists advocating the strategies of non-violence should be striving for?

Left-wing Ukrainian feminists associated with the socialist resource *Commons* are more attracted to the position of Etienne Balibar, who, in contrast to the cautious and compromising position of Habermas, chooses a more open and courageous strategy. Balibar has no illusions about the prospect of pacifying of Putin through negotiation. "You can be more pessimistic about future prospects: you can tell that the chances of avoiding a catastrophe are small" (Balibar 2022). So, the duty of the intellectual, according to Balibar, is to take an unequivocal position in this tragic situation of undecidability, which bears the threat of global nuclear war and the destruction of mankind. And Balibar does make an unequivocal political choice: "I will say that the war of Ukrainians against the Russian invasion is fair, in

the strongest sense of that word. ...I don't feel enthusiastic, but I make my choice: against Putin" (Balibar 2022).

Like Balibar, Žižek believes that the duty of every intellectual today is to unconditionally support the resistance of the Ukrainian people to Putin's invasion and to abandon any policy of "understanding" and "appeasement" of the aggressor (Žižek 2022). This appeasement, for Žižek, even takes a financial form insofar as the West continues to live according to the laws of the capitalist market, every day bringing colossal revenues to the Russian state from the sale of oil and gas (Žižek 2022).

In order to slow down the impending global catastrophe while simultaneously supporting Ukraine, Žižek believes Western governments need to do the following: (a) abandon the policies of "balanced dialogue" with Putin proposed by Habermas, because excessive caution can only encourage the aggressor (one should not be afraid to cross the line where Putin would "get angry" and instead show Putin one's own clear-cut red lines); (b) immediately stop doing business with Putin's Russia and stop relying on market mechanisms and instead directly engage in organizing its own energy supplies; and (c) strengthen the NATO alliance (Žižek 2022).

Thus, it can be stated that the positions of radical philosophers on the left, such as Balibar and Žižek, in assessing the situation in Ukraine coincide with the position of those Ukrainian feminists who believe that the only right and effective way to resist Russian aggression is to support Ukraine's defensive war with Western weapons. Yet Balibar and Žižek seem closer to transnational feminists insofar as Balibar and Žižek are not inclined to identify all Russian citizens with the Putin regime and insofar as they believe a true Ukrainian victory is possible only on the basis of building broad anti-Putin alliances, including alliances with the representatives of all forces opposing Putin in Russia and Belarus.

The fact that in Ukraine politicians abandoned the strategy of broad anti-Putin alliances, relying exclusively on their Western allies and suppressing the left in their country, is, according to Žižek, fundamentally erroneous and becomes the decisive factor that today, more than two years after the start of Russian invasion, Ukrainian resistance to Putin's dictatorship is further from a victorious conclusion (Žižek 2023b). Moreover, according to Žižek, the stake on nationalism and the rejection of solidarity with all opponents of Putin's dictatorship, including Russian dissidents, may lead to the fact that after the end of the war, Ukraine may find itself in even greater colonial dependence on Western corporations, and, as a result, even if Ukraine wins the war, not the Ukrainian people, but the domestic clique of oligarchs may be the winner (Žižek 2023a).

3. Feminist lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war

Despite the divisions between feminist theorists and the antinomies of war discussed above, the dominant standpoint of feminist theory and practice regarding war has been and remains anti-militarism. Cynthia Enloe, in her book *Feminist Lessons of War* (2023), dedicated to Ukrainian feminists, concludes that the experience of the Ukrainian war reaffirms this conviction, even though this conviction raises questions about compatibility of the feminist anti-militarist position with the demands of Ukrainian feminists for the supply of Western artillery (Enloe 2023, 160).

In contrast to pacifism, which insists on the inadmissibility of war as a means of political solutions, feminist anti-militarism emphasizes criticism of the ascendant Clausewitzian militaristic postulate of the omnipotence and irresistibility of the forces of violence in politics. The Clausewitzian position is challenged by feminist theorists of the ethics of nonviolence, in particular by Judith Butler, who, in her feminist critique of violence, argues that the forces of nonviolence can be more effective and efficient in solving political issues than the forces of violence and war.

Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, Butler states, in the face of Putin's aggression against Ukraine, the international feminist community must unconditionally support Ukrainian self-defense and hope that it is successful (Butler 2022). But the full acceptance of the logic of violence as the logic of historical development is, according to Butler, a dead end for human civilization, since the driving force behind any war is the Freudian death drive, the purpose of which is the destruction of social bonds and cooperation, which militaristic masculinity seeks. Given this undeclared "purpose" of war, argues Butler, "[e]ven so-called "just war" runs the risk of a destructiveness that exceeds its stated aims, its deliberate purpose" (Butler 2020, 78).

The idea of war as an expression of our death drive is most clearly revealed in the phenomenon of *war of extermination*, i.e., high intensity conflicts, the main effect of which is the mass elimination of the population of one's adversary, but also one's own, both military/mobilized and civilian. According to Balibar (Balibar 2023), the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars have today reached the level of wars of extermination, and they qualify as ethnocide (in Ukraine) and genocide (in Gaza) (Balibar 2023). When opponents are identified as "absolute enemies" which can only be combated and destroyed, the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars are transformed, as Balibar argues, into "conflicts without diplomatic solution in a predictable future leaving the door open to various forms of escalation" (Balibar 2023), when the passionate desire to destroy one's enemy can only be realized by the capacity of the all the participants of the conflict to accept the decimation of its youth (Balibar 2023). Therefore, in the condition of the ongoing

war of extermination, Ukrainian leaders have to make political decisions in a situation of radical undecidability when (a) it is impossible to stop fighting due to a very passionate desire to carry out a just act of retribution against the enemy, who threatens ethnocide of the Ukrainian nation and when (b) it is simultaneously impossible to continue to fight, since the continuation of the war threatens decimation of future generations of Ukrainians.

However, if at the level of diplomatic relations war of extermination is seen as a conflict without solution, as Balibar states, then at the level of ideology it seems that such a solution exists, and that it is the only possible one, the one that is desired by all the warring parties, and which is presented as complete, final, and salutary. This decision is *Victory*, an event that, as soon as it happens—and, as the warring peoples are told by their leaders, it will arrive soon enough—will immediately end the state of undecidability, which is becoming more and more unbearable for all participants in the conflict. But this coming redemptive *Victory* is not handed to us as a gift. Just like the long-awaited *Peace*, it must not only be earned, but acquired, conquered. *Victory* is the empty master signifier in which our collective desires, passions, and hopes are invested today. In the situation of ongoing war, it has become the object of an intense and uncompromising hegemonic struggle between various parties and ideologies that seek to fill it with their own political content.

What image of *Victory* is gaining hegemony amidst the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war?

If we remain at the level of mass-media discourse, it seems obvious that the nationalist version of *Victory* is gaining hegemony, which ensures mass mobilization and a long chain of equivalences that overcome class, racial, gender, age, and other differences. A key element of the nationalist version of *Victory* is the identification of victorious subjectivity with the nation-state: the nation stands above all, and any individual or social group that does not contribute to the self-assertion of the nation is defined as a “foreign agent,” “collaborator,” “undesirable organization,” and so on. *Victory* in the war of nationalisms means: (a) total humiliation and disintegration of the nation-state’s enemy; and (b) the rise and endless strengthening of the power of one’s own nation-state, which must be revived and renewed as a result of the war (Eisenstein 1996, 27–29). Here, the nationalists of all the countries in the war are in complete agreement and complete international solidarity. Also, in the universal nationalist picture of the world, *Victory* is described as the completion of profane historical time and the transition to a messianic time of new beginnings and the birth of a completely new super-nation.

This version of *Victory* is challenged primarily by the traditional opponents of the nationalists: Marxists and anarchists. They believe that in a war

of competing nationalisms, victory, as the triumph of one political force over another, is in principle impossible. Their argument is based on a thesis regarding the symbiotic relationship between the state and war, which forms one of the constitutive ontological forces of capitalism. As Eric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato state in their study *Wars and Capital*: “War is as integral a part of the Capital-State machine as production, labor, racism, and sexism” (Alliez and Lazzarato 2016, 15–16).

From the Marxist point of view, as long as the capitalist state exists, war is permanent—including in the form of “peace”—as a world civil war waged among populations and against the population. When permanent capitalist war changes from bloodless to bloody, it simply changes form; in this case, there can be no question of any other victory than the victory of world capital. And the state ensures this victory of capital with the help of ideological apparatuses.

In modern total war, both sides fight on the side of capital. Therefore, the democracy-autocracy opposition is false, according to Lazzarato: “The confrontation between the United States and Russia that is the backdrop to this war is not between a democracy and autocracy but between economic oligarchies that resemble each other in many aspects, in particular as rentier oligarchies” (Lazzarato 2022).

Wars that are not part of the total war of capital against the population—i.e., anti-capitalist wars—include, according to Alliez and Lazzarato, revolutionary wars waged against Western imperialism (for example, the revolutionary war in Haiti at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and today’s anti-colonial guerrilla movements in Africa and Latin America). Therefore, the correct political opposition, in Marxists view, is between revolution and counterrevolution. Every ongoing war must be evaluated according to the following criteria: Against whom is the war being waged? Whose subjugation/domination does it reinforce?

As for feminists, they are often critical and suspicious of the theories and political strategies of Marxists and anarchists. But when it comes to the question of war, the feminist position is closer to the position of Marxists than nationalists. The nationalist version of victory as a resolution to the deadlock of a war of extermination is rejected by feminists, firstly, because nationalism is consistently associated in feminist theory with patriarchy and misogyny, which are embodied in practices of double exploitation of women: both in socio-political reality and as symbolical figures (Yuval-Davis 1997, 19). As Gayatri Spivak notes “woman is the most primitive instrument of nationalism,” be it the nationalism of the colonizer or the colonized nation, the oppressors or subalterns, coinciding in the attitude towards the instrumentalization of female subjects (Spivak 2009, 35–36).

Secondly, nationalism, from the point of view of feminist theory, is not an emancipatory, but an anti-emancipatory policy, belonging to the register of regression as an inadequate mechanism of crisis management, as defined by Rahel Jaeggi, which does not resolve social contradictions, but only exacerbates and intensifies them, as in the case of such a mode of regression as resentment, which does not satisfy the desire for revenge, but only strengthens the feeling of remaining unavenged and thus dependent on another (Jaeggi 2022, 35–36). Nationalism, as Nacira Guenif writes, acting under the slogans of national liberation in fact establishes “[t]he preeminence of the powerful over the people, ... led by a military power that never hesitated to crush its people, especially its youth. Nationalism was a plague, it was the very reason why this country [her native Algeria] and its people could never be free and sovereign” (Guenif 2022, 116).

To follow the path of nationalism means, from the point of view of feminist criticism, to accept the policies of regression and resentment, which are actively used by the leaders of the Russian Federation today, emphasizing their “grievances” and “claims” towards Western countries, and which are opposed by the idea of an emancipatory war for democracy against the dictatorship of authoritarianism, which Ukraine is leading today, according to liberal democratic politicians and political philosophers. Effectively countering Russian resentment nationalism means, from a feminist point of view, choosing strategies not of nationalist, but of transnational solidarity or by the formula coined by Helene Petrovsky “solidarity as practice of being-in-common” (Petrovsky 2022, 97): as (a) non-hierarchical and inclusive solidarity of a democratic type and (b) emancipatory, based on the idea of non-resentment resistance to aggression and military violence.

This anti-militarist feminist strategy of resistance to the atrocities of Russian aggression as a strategy of resistance that is not resentful and faithful to the ideas of democracy may seem unrealistic and utopian in the context of the ongoing war of extermination in Ukraine, as supporters of the feminist ethics of non-violence admit (Butler 2022). But only a strategy of this type will allow, in their opinion, the preservation of democracy in Ukraine, which would be the main Ukrainian victory in this war. An anti-militarist feminist strategy of resistance would also allow for a truly popular mass mobilization against Putin’s aggression, in contrast to the current nationalist mobilization, which is a limited mobilization, that only allows the conflict to intensify into a war of extermination but does not provide the political mass mobilization necessary to protect democracy and to resist large-scale military authoritarian aggression.

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