The Italian Left and the War in Ukraine

written by Piero Maestri | August 10, 2022

April 25—Liberation Day, the anniversary of the Partisans' entry into Milan in 1945 and the fall of Fascism—is the most soul-stirring holiday for Italian leftists and anti-fascists. The main parade is held in Milan. Organized by ANPI (Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia-National Association of Partisans of Italy) and the Permanent Antifascist Committee, it brings together anti-fascist parties, confederal trade unions, and local institutions.

Following on the heels of widespread condemnation of the president of the ANPI,[1] this year's event attracted close attention and high expectations. At the same time, a controversy about the character of the Italian Resistance of 1943-1945 and its "radical difference" from the Ukrainian resistance, considered only as a military action of a rather right-wing government, had been strong for weeks.

About 70,000 people arrived in the square, and it is interesting to describe the parade of banners: ANPI and Partisans, along with signs commemorating concentration camps; mayors and representatives of institutions; center-left parties; the Ukrainian community, against Putin's war; a small group from the Radical Party with four NATO flags; pacifist associations with rainbow flags against the war and the sending of weapons; the Palestinian youth with their flags; the various parties of the more-or-less Communist or post-Communist left, against the war and NATO; Stalinist "anti-fascist" Donbass groups (with the colors of the St. George's cross); anarchists; and No Vax and No Green Pass banners—a confusion that nevertheless represents the state of actions and relations in the peace movement and the left.

Let Us Then Take a Step Back

The anti-war demonstrations in Italy began immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24. In fact, attempts to take to the streets had been made even earlier by some sectors of the pacifist and anti-capitalist movements warning of the risk of open conflict in the area.

The two major initiatives of the peace movement against the war so far have been those on February 26 in Milan and March 5 in Rome.

In the first event, the leading organizations called for demonstrations because "the crisis in Ukraine, the tensions between Russia and NATO, risk creating a military escalation; it is important to support peace initiatives against the proliferation of weapons, a sector that has never seen a crisis even in the harshest moments of the pandemic. We call on everyone for dialogue and not for weapons to prevail."

Some 20,000 people arrived in Milan's Cathedral Square, including one to two thousand Ukrainians who, however, remained on the sides of the square with their flags and slogans, without being invited to speak from the small stage of the organizers, while the various groups that had signed the appeal paraded.

On March 5, a cease-fire demonstration was called in Rome with an appeal that read, “We must stop the war in Ukraine. We must stop all wars in the world. We condemn the aggression and war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine. We want a ceasefire; we demand the withdrawal of troops. We need UN action that with authority and legitimacy leads the negotiations between the parties. We call for a policy of disarmament and active neutrality. From Italy and Europe must come political and negotiating solutions.”

The appeal was signed by the Network for Peace and Disarmament (retepacedisarmo.org), an organization that brings together the largest labor union federations, CGIL-CISL, UIL; large associations such as ACLI (Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani, Christian Italian Workers Associations), ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana, Italian Cultural Recreational Association); and so on—basically, the historical, social, and cultural fabric of the Italian left and the peace movement.

These events and others that are organized by these networks, in their diversity, all have some obvious similarities in their demands:

> A firm NO to sending arms to Ukraine.
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> The rejection of NATO enlargement and rearmament (increased military spending).
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> Calling on the Italian government and the European Union to take all kinds of diplomatic initiatives to bring about an end to the conflict.

How can these positions—definitely a majority within the anti-war demonstrations throughout the West—be explained, in contrast to what the Eastern European leftists, and the anti-war movement in Russia itself, are repeatedly demanding?

There are obviously different explanations, and it is good to avoid any generalization or trivialization. First, it should be pointed out that for the vast majority of the people and groups who took to the streets, it is not a form of neo-campism, or worse, red-brownism, whereby Putin’s war would somehow be considered a just reaction to U.S. and NATO policies. These positions exist, but they are in a minority and in some cases extremely marginal—although sometimes there are overlaps (as we will see later).

I think several explanations can be given, which sometimes overlap and sometimes are separate from each other:

> The fear of escalation that could lead to a world conflict, perhaps even a nuclear one. This is a sincere fear and one that looks at the belligerent statements of the contending and allied states, seeing the risk of their not wanting to find ways out in order to negotiate;
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> A sincere concern that the continuation of the war will cause more disaster and mourning in the Ukrainian population itself, generally regarded as “victims,” forced to endure bombardment for which not only Putin is responsible but also the Ukrainian government itself, which forces the male population to stay and fight, often against the wishes of the men involved and their families;
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> A lack of understanding of the policies of Putin and his circle in Russia, not because of a failure to recognize their autocratic and repressive aspects, but because Russian policy is regarded as a reaction to that of the U.S. and NATO. In this sense the war did not begin on February 24, 2022, but as early as 1989-1990, as NATO not only did not disband but even expanded to include several former Warsaw Pact countries;

> A similar limitation, perhaps even more pregnant with consequences, with respect to the history of Ukraine. Ukrainian President Zelensky is put on the same level as the Russian president in terms of arrogance and testosterone—but more importantly, the existence of a neo-Nazi and/or nationalist right wing is exaggerated as if these were determinants in Ukrainian politics. And of course, Euromaidan is read as a coup and the subsequent war in Donbass as the responsibility of Ukrainian governments that "killed 14,000 civilians in eight years."[2]
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> The current war is interpreted as a clash between opposing nationalisms (and/or imperialisms), with similar responsibilities for creating a situation of open warfare. Within this explanation can be found positions from a feminist standpoint that see a clash between opposing patriarchal and *machista* logics.

All in all, such positions were somewhat predictable and maintain their own coherence for most of the actors present. Particularly noteworthy are those of nonviolent pacifism, Catholic and non-Catholic, which considers any armed response as taking part in the conflict and making it even more dangerous and dramatic. Hence the idea that sending weapons means not only participating in the ongoing war but worsening its effects on people and politicians.

A position that is also widespread in feminist circles considers what is taking place to be a clash between two equally nefarious ideas of "homeland" (*patria* in Italian), a reactionary masculine concept. This position holds that it is important not to side with any of the conflicting parties but with those who choose to evade, fleeing and deserting, as well as with the victims.

On a more directly political level, all parties or organized groups on the left, outside the Democratic Party and the confederal and grassroots trade unions, share most of the positions described above. Even those with a consistent "no weapons" position try to participate in the mobilizations of the peace movement, which, however, they do not directly organize, much less lead.

It may be of some interest to point out two particular positions in this area. On the one hand, Rifondazione Comunista has always been opposed to wars and against NATO, and today they emphasize opposition to increased military spending and to NATO with "Neither with Putin nor with NATO" banners. Rifondazione is led by a political secretary who, as an MP in 2007-2008, voted in favor of a state budget proposed by the Romano Prodi government, of which Rifondazione was a part, that increased military spending. Inconsistency? More like pragmatism, whereby it is different to be in government than in opposition. Today Rifondazione is an almost irrelevant party with no weight in national political dynamics, so that it can take radical positions without having to be accountable to government allies (which it no longer has).

In any case, Rifondazione—which holds the U.S. government and NATO primarily responsible for the current situation—condemns Russian actions, unlike the plethora of parties that invoke the Communist name, which are more or less aligned with Putin's strategy as a necessary response to U.S. and NATO imperialism and the Ukrainian puppet government conniving with neo-Nazis. It is also true that Rifondazione, like the Party of Italian Communists, participated in the conferences of world Communist parties along with the Chinese and Russian CPs.

On the other hand, the position of the organization Potere al Popolo (Power to the People), which was formed by some of those who left Rifondazione along with other political and social groups, and the union Unione Sindacale di Base (USB)—which are linked organizationally and directed politically by the organization Rete dei Comunisti (which produces the electronic magazine , contropiano.org)—should be noted. USB played a leading role in the port workers' protest against sending weapons to Ukraine, trying to block the loading of them, an anti-militarist practice already

used in other conflicts where NATO was a direct player in a war of aggression.

USB is part of the World Trade Union Federation (www.wftucentral.org) and has participated in several meetings with it in Damascus, including at the invitation of President Assad. This detail is not secondary. Even in the case of the Syrian conflict, USB sided decisively with Assad (and thus with Russia) in the face of an uprising supposedly desired and financed by U.S. imperialism, which was alleged to have also invented and financed ISIS, like Al Qaeda before; this also explains the USB's coldness toward the experience of Rojava and the YPG, which at one stage of the conflict leaned on the U.S. to fight ISIS.

There is no shortage of anarchist and radical-left political and social groups that support the legitimacy of Ukrainian resistance, including armed resistance, and that in recent months have come into contact with the Ukrainian and Eastern European lefts, especially through trade union delegations and caravans (such as the one on May 1) and with the European Committee for Solidarity with Ukraine. Likewise, the participation of various social-political networks in the (www.transnational-strike.info/events), launched by the Transnational Social Strike, should be noted.

Common to these groups is a stark condemnation of Russian aggression and a willingness to build networks that include Ukrainian and Eastern anarchists and anti-liberal leftists. Virtually no group directly supports the sending of weapons because they all see this choice by the Italian government as a harbinger of a policy of rearmament and increased military spending at the expense of social spending.

In some cases, there were initiatives that did not directly name this issue, supporting Ukrainian resistance without directly criticizing the sending of arms, though not calling for it. These positions are widespread in the movement as a whole but have failed to emerge in recent months on the level of street mobilization (in Rome there was no political demonstration in front of the Russian embassy—only a testimony by Amnesty International—and a few dozen people could be found in Milan in front of the consulate).

Lastly, it is worth noting the demonstrations against the Russian invasion promoted by government parties, collateral organizations, or local governments in support of the Italian government's own decision to protest Putin and give direct support to Ukraine (in one of these there was a video link with the Ukrainian president).

Government-promoted demonstrations were also attended by Ukrainian communities while they were deserted by the anti-war movement and leftists—evidently uncomfortable with demonstrating with political opponents who are pursuing a deeply liberalist "emergency" executive and supporting sectors of capital on public services, labor, and so on.

One element that needs to be emphasized about these two months of war is the belligerent and polarized climate that has been created, mainly by journalism, both print and television. Thus, we see journalism increasingly taking on the character of propaganda in the name of a "necessary" national unity that mocks pacifism and unquestioningly sides with the positions of the government—and Western allies.

Particularly embarrassing are television "talk show" programs that make it impossible seriously and calmly to advocate radically anti-war positions or support the Ukrainian resistance while not supporting NATO. These shows invite embarrassing characters who play the part of war opponents with ambiguous or unspeakable positions. The mainstream reaction is to call for some form of censorship of positions that are not aligned with the government.

Getting out of this polarization is extremely difficult while staying within that medium and "theater of politics" logic. That same logic seems to overflow into social media, particularly within Facebook, where prejudiced positions are fought without any possibility of dialogue—a tendency into which even intellectually capable people fall, circulating "information" of dubious provenance and really thinking that they are contributing to the idea of the "complexity" of the current conflict and thus to the impossibility of taking sides "except with peace."

Looking at this lively but rather confused reality from a more personal point of view, that of an anti-war activism that has always sought to have internationalist solidarity at its center, the profound limitation of analysis and consequent action of the Italian peace movement and leftists as a whole (meaning here only the anti-liberal and anarchist ones) definitely leaps to the eye.

This limitation is precisely represented by the inability of the left and peace movement, in the face of Russia's war of aggression, to combine no-to-war and anti-militarism with internationalist solidarity and empathy with the actors in Ukraine. This is a limitation that was already evident in their response to the revolutions in the Arab world and particularly in Syria.

As we wrote as recently as two years ago (*Jacobin Italia*, January 17, 2020),

> The other element that comes back overwhelmingly today is the inability of the movement as a whole to understand the momentous novelty represented by revolutionary attempts in the Arab region (and beyond) and the ambiguous and dramatic entanglements between the various global and regional powers that are doing everything possible to bury those attempts, first with internal military repression, and then war deployed against civilian populations. A blindness, either willful or shamelessly accepted, that has turned its back on any experience that could not be cataloged within the false alternative of "regimes versus jihadism"—with the significant exception of the Kurdish movement.
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> As has also been the case in the past, it has been delegated to NGOs and international cooperation to intervene to alleviate the pain of war, to materially and psychologically support the victims of conflicts—almost never posing the political question of the relationship with the concrete subjects who experience those conflicts.

The same thing is happening in Ukraine today. One does not see and often does not want to see the anti-liberal and anarchist actors that in the face of Russian aggression have decided to resist, both with arms and without, maintaining their critical autonomy from the Zelensky government, which they oppose even in this war phase when it takes anti-liberal measures particularly against the rights of women workers.

An exponent of Italian feminism gave a very interesting interview, definitely of high quality intellectually, politically, and morally, on the subject of "what to do?" at this stage. She advocated support for Russian dissident(s) "and also those in Ukraine *if there are any*" (italics ours). This is a glaring example of the inability to sustain a confrontational debate with the Ukrainian left and social movements that support armed resistance and call for sending arms from NATO countries.

This limitation is accompanied by calling into question of the right to self-determination, looked upon with suspicion because it is a harbinger of nationalism and identitarianism. And in this way, legitimate Ukrainian aspirations to build their own democracy, their own future, are being erased.

Even if one disagrees with NATO and Europe sending weapons, one must still recognize the legitimacy of Ukraine's demand for them and confront its reasons. And one must recognize and meet with Ukrainians.

This practice of encounter has been and still is the focus of several delegations and caravans that have left for Ukraine in recent months, with political goals along with humanitarian ones. In these years we have learned how necessary is a mutualist as well as a conflictualist politics and practice. Mutualism means first a direct relationship with Ukrainian women and men who have fled their country or are already present in Italy as activists and workers (who in recent weeks have also demonstrated with dignity and firmness their desire for peace, justice, and freedom for Ukraine) and with people in Russia who do not want this war—to try together with them to demilitarize our consciences and our relations, and with them to figure out what support we can give here and in their countries. This means crossing that line and becoming a megaphone for the Ukrainian, Russian, and Eastern radical lefts, which are too often ignored or looked down upon.

It is now clear that this war, like those waged by Western imperialism, is the result of a political and social crisis of a capitalist system that has chosen the path of financial and speculative profit and the interconnected path of increased exploitation at the planetary level—to which are added the authoritarian and expansionist tendencies evident today in Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

This exploitation and these authoritarian policies can only be maintained through a gradual hollowing out of democratic participation and the rights of women and men. To be able to do this, the military instrument, both internal and external to states, is not secondary, hence repression and war—war against peoples.

To strive for a world without war and military repression is to stand with the oppressed in their fight for liberation and to strongly and passionately support the dynamics that arise around the world for this liberation. And even in this crisis, building peace means building social justice—alongside other anti-liberal, anarchist, and anti-authoritarian social and political forces who also need our active, passionate, and committed support.

Notes

1. On April 4, the ANPI published a statement on the Bucha crimes that read, "The ANPI strongly condemns the Bucha massacre, looking forward to a UN-led international commission of inquiry made up of representatives of neutral countries to ascertain what really happened, why it happened, and who are the perpetrators. This terrible affair confirms the urgency of putting an end to the horror of war and the bellicose fury that grows every day." The statement was judged ambiguous and rather "equidistant," more so coming from an association that invokes the values of anti-fascism and resistance (including armed resistance) to Nazi-fascism. From there arose a noisy and very media-driven campaign of attack on the president of the ANPI.

2. Michael Karadjis, "On the fantastic tale that 'the Ukrainian army killed 14,000 ethnic Russians in Donbas between 2014 and 2022'," June 16, 2022.