

(The)War(s) of the World(s)

Cindy Zeiher & Mike Grimshaw

Famine, plague, and war are the three most famous ingredients of this wretched world...

All animals are perpetually at war with each other...

Air, earth and water are arenas of destruction.¹

Voltaire, 1764

There is a poignant section in Tchaikovsky's famous *1812 Overture* which to this day has the potency to send shivers up the spine of any avid (or we could say, close) listener. Before the infamous nationalistic finale, complete with canons and bells in celebration of successful Russian defence against Napoleon, there is a mesmerizing and long descending spiralling tempo signalling the fall of the enemy, the jubilant fleeing of the victor against the bitter cold. It is a haunting and horrific reminder of the perils of war. Tchaikovsky apparently composed the commissioned piece quickly, and without feeling, warmth or love – one commentator described it as “one of the most dreary and repulsive works in the whole of music”.² Perhaps this was Tchaikovsky's intention, to create a musical encounter which sidesteps judgements reserved in music of beauty and agreeableness. Yet it remains one of the most nostalgic, recognisable, recorded and performed (and for some, kitsch) orchestral pieces to date.³ Tchaikovsky's provocation is that if we dare think about war we are forced to think about the concept of the world as an infinite entity constantly unfolding upon itself.

How is it that music can be expressed and provoke thought, curiosity, and terror about war? Is it because the piece is considered within the ilk of Romanticism? Or perhaps it speaks to something ineffable concerning the catastrophes people inflict on each other? War and warfare fascinate, and yet are so unthinkable. Whatever one might purport about freedom, it is war which throws any idea of it into uncertainty. War is the liminal space, the rupture, the event between what we can call everyday existence and one which is only just liveable. It mixes ordinary citizens with the order of the enemy. In war, worlds collide, moreover the world collides with itself and its own impasses.⁴ As German philosopher, Jan Völker states,

To think the world as a rational entity was nothing more than an imaginary delusion that has been working until now: *now* (a 'now' which is itself expanded in time) we can no longer ignore the consequences of this blindness.⁵

Does not the event of war offer that such investment in rational delusion is also a horrific confrontation with the position that we treat the world as disposable? Is not war so unthinkable that we can only handle thinking of it as an either a material or religious cause undertaken in the name of ideological aggression? Is this not why military training and ideology are based upon the definition of an enemy as 'the other', which moreover, reveals the potency of this stereotyped image when soldiers carry out atrocities? Such questions prompt us to consider how in war the sovereign decision to undertake it also gets handed down to each individual actor who is, via the order, asked and told to decide the exception, that is, to kill another human and collectives of humans.

Yet, what about the 'good for-ness' of war as in *The Art of War*, applauded and deified by poets, business gurus and military strategists alike. Here our minds inevitably turn to the horrible events in the Ukraine, yet another repetition of historical catastrophe... At the same time the contours of sovereignty and war range from day-to-day banalities through to the more urgent crises of who lives and who dies. In his *Introduction to Robespierre's Virtue and Terror*, Žižek, recapitulates the Jacobin legacy of revolutionary terror and Robespierre's "politics of truth",⁶ identifying how an assembly of bodies in the name of a sovereign truth not only enables but enforces power. Such an inevitably gives rise to a terror which because it is potentially revolutionary can be seen as Benjamin's divine violence⁷ where it is the people who always pay the price for justice. Thus, there is no safe distance from the terror of war because direct confrontation with all-encompassing power results in a logic of revolutionary sovereignty. This fully exploits biopower within the order of the affective.

Whether directly encountered or indirectly experienced, war and warfare are powerfully anxiety-provoking and emotional.

A striking example of a life lived in terror is, of course, Hannah Arendt who experienced two world wars, civil wars and other political and moral upheavals: "She lived through what she called "dark times" whose history reads like a tale of horrors in which everything taken for granted turns into its opposite."⁸ Her life and writings, especially *On the Nature of Totalitarianism* remind us that attempting to think the unthinkable *vis-à-vis* war is not only necessary but urgent. For Arendt, the best and most we can do is cultivate a preparedness for such an event. Such attention to preparedness to that which is unanticipated comprises her philosophical question (and moreover her viability of political philosophy *per se*) concerning the contours of those moments of what might be called freedom.

Badiou's representation of the soldier in Passolini situates war as existing within the subject, the humanity of the spirit which is irreducible to the status of heroism:⁹

The old figure of heroism, before the great French Revolution was the figure of the individual warrior. It was the central figure in all the great epic poems of all countries. It is not a figure of collective discipline relationship to an Idea. It is a figure of affirmation of the self, promotion of a visible superiority. It is not a figure of creative freedom. Rather, the classical hero, in the form of the warrior, assumes his destiny. The figure of the warrior is a combination of victory and destiny, of superiority and obedience. The warrior is strong, but he has no real choice concerning the use of his strength. And often his death is atrocious and without any clear meaning. The figure of the warrior is beyond humanity, because it is between the human animal and the Gods. It is not really a creation, but rather a sort of place, resulting from a whim of the Gods. It is an aristocratic figure.

What is at stake in war is not only killing and being killed but also self-destruction and breaking with the 'instinct' of self-preservation: that is, war is a contradiction which signals desire to be free from the social bond and the rules which structure it and yet, wills the subject stand in the very name of social order. When democracies engage in war it is justified by an ethics of conflict driven by 'moral' ideals deemed worth fighting for – or 'immoral' or 'amoral' ones to fight against. Economic and territorial conquests (or losses) are pivoted around the primacy of the political, where everyone is defined either as friend or enemy.

Mbembe's concept of necropolitics conceptualises the sovereignty of war within biopower (which bodies live and which die) – Foucault's notion that that power is bodily inscribed and exercised¹⁰ – as the materiality of life as an explicit manifestation of power which can be terrifying:

One could summarize [...] what Michel Foucault meant by biopower: that domain of life over which power has taken control. But under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer? Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?¹¹

While many thinkers condemn war – Diderot comments that war is “a convulsive and violent disease of the body politic” – other thinkers have actively supported war and warfare: Fanon supported the Algerian War of Independence; Jankélévitch joined the French Resistance; Wittgenstein fought in WWI and won medals for bravery; Rawls enlisted in the US Army during WWII and was transferred to the Pacific, and even Descartes spent three years as a soldier during the Bohemian Revolt.¹² And then there is the deeply problematic case of Jünger, a philosopher of war, a thinker as problematic (yet as necessary) as Heidegger; who fought – on the ‘wrong side’ – twice... yet who perhaps, more than any other modern thinker, makes us think of what war does – and can do – to ‘being human’?

What cannot be overlooked is the feminist curiosity about war and moreover, “women's wider integration into military historiographies – not as exceptions, but as key actors – continues apace, opening new ways of thinking about the gendered labour involved in the conduct of warfare”.¹³ Here we can ask how are women, women's bodies and war intersected? How are gendered (self-) understandings of war implicated in language and images? How is labour interpellated into public and media discourse about war? How is it that the labour of respectability which goes along with household and reproductive labour be translated into war labour? How

might be the body be a template in such embodied war(fares)? Feminist historian Michelle Moyd puts this aptly when she says,¹⁴

Doing feminist military history means reckoning with military violence that otherwise might receive short shrift in military history. It reminds us that women in the military are commonly cast either as vixens or prudes, as sexually available or “one of the guys,” as disabled by their menstruating or potentially pregnant bodies, or exerting outsized sexual influence on hapless men incapable of controlling their sexual urges. It reminds us that women in the ranks often face warfare’s inherent dangers even as they also face potential sexual assault by their male comrades who view them not as equals, but as targets. It reminds us that sex work always accompany militaries, though the extent to which sex workers can control their labor conditions differs according to how actively military officials choose to intervene in regulating the sex lives of its (male) troops. It reminds us that families’ abilities to accompany soldiers to domestic or overseas military assignments are part of a larger incentive structure that communicates to soldiers an investment in their well-being, their upward mobility, their success.

This issue dedicated to thinking (the unthinkability of) war considers the compulsion to war today against some of the more classical philosophical questions which circulate human nature, ‘just war’, freedom and morality. If war is good for nothing, then why are we always so ready to threaten or declare it? And what about the propensity to declare war on social and economic issues; or the war on drugs; or the war on terror; or as the *Guardian* opined a few years ago it’s time to shift from a war on terror to a war on climate change.¹⁵ What can ‘war’ mean today and why are we still so keen to invoke it on so many different levels? Could this not lead to for the pacifist, in their vehement opposition to ‘declare war’ on war’?

Baudrillard’s famous quip, “The Gulf War Did Not take Place” caused outrage at the time. We are forced, Baudrillard says, to interpellate ourselves in the spectacle and repetition of images of war and war-fare in order to elicit any response. War is imagined just as much as it is an actuality. It is this collision of fantasy – usually of war being in service to a higher good – and the lived experiences of war which are attended to as problematically mutually exclusive. Baudrillard reserved a particular resentment and disdain for the USA in his treatment of war. Looming over us are wars and threats of wars, whether they be gender, technological (ChatGPT’s post-Barthesean ‘death of the author’ which threatens the illusion of authenticity),

environmental, military, political and so on... One cannot overlook the economics of war: wars are continuously waged and there are certainly 'wages' to be made in war.

If we take the position that the viability of any idea is put to the test when it can be divided, split into counterparts, that a gap appears resultant from those crises which permeate our lives, then war is ripe as a consistently contradictory idea. It exists because of division, and it continues momentum in the name of such division. Importantly the lines of division are not clean (war is never a clean game), finite or always subject to historical reverence, but war serve to define the shape of the battle the division itself serves. Baudrillard, it seems drew the lines of war differently – we are all complicit in war and warring regardless of our chosen cause.

Past wars stick to the present like some prohibitive monument. Invasions and ongoing wars, genocide and terrorism continue and yet never cease to amaze us. Often reactions to war are on moral grounds of 'just' or 'unjust' wars as if only such reflexivity were so transparent and a simple uncomplicated procedure. The horror of war lies in its utter rupture upon subjectivities and collective bodies which are used as needed to restore order of the present. We can say that war erupts when the (problematic) assumption of givenness as a form and fantasy of moral ordering drastically fails – or worse, is refused.¹⁶

This issue commences with women's roles in war and anti-war movements. German sociologist, militant and conscientious objector, Frigga Haug is well known in the German speaking world for her critique of war, especially its effects on women. In her contribution focusing on the woman soldier in the context of the Gulf War, Haug deliberates the cross over between the military soldier and the woman, who she claims is always an embodied soldier of care and duty. She pays close attention to public discourse and how language is couched in war-like vernacular and images by asking, "the real question lies as to what extent existing gender relations legitimize the waging of wars? Not, whether equality should actually be pushed into existing wars?"

Theologian and philosopher, William Franke closely ponders the category of peace as not the natural or necessarily logical otherside of war. Rather, he argues that one starts to deliberate any thinking about war from the apophatic tradition; that there is an inherent unsayability, unthinkability to that in which "rational capacity expresses itself finally in a mode of infinite self-critique". Pursuing an all-sovereign peace, Franke argues, might be hard to think but it is worth pursuing an impossible ideal.

American philosopher and activist, Ted Stolz offers an expansive manifesto critically deliberating the imperialist undertones of the conditions for "a just war"

being a “class politics of nature”. Drawing upon political philosophy, songs, poems, anthems, and memoirs, Stolz generously takes the reader by the hand into the battlefield of thinking about what it means to resist killing and instead take up the task of being a humanist intellectual soldier, attuned to those “recesses of life’ [and which] bear the dialectic by means of which the historical expropriators of land and lives are themselves expropriated.”

French philosopher of poetry, Judith Balso offers her urgent plea to think the current war in Ukraine. Here she offers four distinctive points for us to consider regarding structures and investments in the social uptake of war as a divisive justification. She includes an *addendum* to her text which speaks to the most recent political events concerning the Ukraine, and pleas for an “independent resistance” to the ongoing Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine.

Continuing current concerns in Ukraine, philosophers, Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo offer that we can think of this event as *the* WW4. They draw particular attention to the limits of war and especially the ideological conditions which prevent a “war without limits” and ask a specific question: “Why is capitalism incapable of finding a limit to war?”. Here they draw upon Lenin’s controversy with Kautsky.

Philosopher and theoretician, Todd McGowan turns to Hegel to think about war and how Hegel’s theory of war is problematic. Heraclitus once stated with great conviction that “war is the father of all things,” and it is understood that Hegel did not disagree with such a sentiment. McGowan offers that Hegel’s emphasis on the universal disavows the subject of war – “war reminds subjects that the universal trumps their particularity, even their particular lives”. McGowan goes on to offer that such disinvestment of subjectivity (which is at war with itself) is Hegel’s error in judgement particularly those contradictions arising from the consequences of war.

Cultural and literary theorist, Roland Végso offers that the so-called non combative Cold War provides ways in which we can think of Foucauldian discourse as a specific condition for philosophical thinking. It is Foucault’s dedication to his method of historicization -- to be stuck to the conditions of history -- which allows for both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary capacities: “the state of nature is not the state of a ‘perpetual war’ but that of a ‘perpetual cold war’.”

Political theorist, Jeta Mulaj offers a provocation to thinking alliance during war. She recounts growing up during the Kosovar war which lead to her current critical deliberations concerning how ‘radical’ intellectuals are implicitly ideologically invested concerning questions of imperialism, specifically how “debates around the legality of the Kosova intervention are intertwined with concerns about sovereignty—

specifically whether international law allows for humanitarian interventions to supersede state sovereignty.”

Radical theologian, historian and ‘mongrel philosopher,’ Mike Grimshaw writes of the problem of Cold War nostalgia when thinking of the Cold War as a cultural event. What did the Cold War enable and why and how? But more so, with whom can we experience its continuing aftermath?

Adorno famously said that poetry was no longer possible following the Holocaust. The atrocities are so great that no mediation of language can be fathomed – and perhaps there needs to be pause and space between what is experienced as unsayable and what can be said as a logical time of trauma. War we might say is in the category of the ineffable, the unsayable, that collective trauma exists beyond language and cannot be spoken about. And yet at the same time, we can take Adorno’s provocation as one which inspires some struggle towards expression. This issue concludes with the responses of six respected Aotearoa/New Zealand poets and lyricists who respond to war, women, the natural world, embodiment, care, madness, exhaustion, and duty.

We thank all the contributors to this issue on war – what Cicero called “contention by force” – which remains regrettably necessary to carefully think through.

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Notes

¹ “Guerre” from *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*

² <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/tchaikovsky-s-1812-overture-the-complete-guide>

³ Ibid

⁴ Emphasis added. This idea of the world colliding specifically with its own impasses comes from Jan Völker’s philosophical exposition on deliberating the Anthropocene in *Filozofski vestnik*’s issue dedicated to thinking the concept of the world, edited by Rok Benčin. Provocative and timely, the entire issue can be accessed here: <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/issue/view/849>

⁵ *The End of Life Is Not the Worst: On Heidegger’s Notion of the World* (2021), *Filozofski vestnik*, 42(2), pp. 113-132.

⁶ Žižek, Slavoj. 2017. *Slavoj Žižek Presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*. London: Verso, p. viii

⁷ Ibid, pp. x-xi.

⁸ From *Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust*

⁹ Badiou, Alain. 2007. *The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry*. UCLA. Accessed from: <https://www.lacan.com/badsold.htm>

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.

¹¹ Mbembe, Joseph-Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15(1), p. 12.

¹² For those interested in thinkers thinking about war, *Military History Matters Journal* dedicated an ongoing series in 2014 to influential thinkers and their relationship with war.

¹³ See Kara Dixon Vuic, *The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.

¹⁴ Moyd, Michelle, *Beyond Women and War: The Lens of Feminist Military History*, 2020, Accessed from: <https://nursingcliclo.org/2020/11/10/beyond-women-and-war-the-lens-of-feminist-military-history/#footnoteref2>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/07/its-time-to-shift-from-the-war-on-terror-to-a-war-on-climate-change>

¹⁶ It is worth noting here the later work of Jankélévitch who actively wrote against 'the given' treating it as a condescending, sanctimonious, commanding and sometimes oppressive instrument.