

From the Editor: Peace as a Norm

Michael Borshchevsky

I was born just before the start of the Second World War, and by the time it reached the territory of the USSR I was two years old. Not a great age, but a child's memory (imprinting) is particularly strong and events are engraved on it for a whole lifetime.

So it turned out that for me, and my generation, the first childhood impression was the start of the war, and the next its continuation. For I lived in Leningrad (now St Petersburg), one of the European cities that suffered the full horrors of war – bombing raids, blockade, famine, the death of about a million citizens. I do not intend to describe the horrors engraved on my childhood memory – this has been done thousands of times by others.

I am recalling this now only in order to say that for my generation, who started life with these impressions, war was the norm, we knew no other life, and I contend that the whole subsequent life of every child who lived through the war, wherever it came and however it took its course, was defined by the state of *war as the norm*.

Later it took us a long time to adapt and realise that peace is the norm, whereas war is a pathology. Hearing the sound of a fire engine in my sleep, I often take it for the air raid siren, warning of a bombing raid. The sound of the metronome in a musician's practice room always and invariably draws out memories of the hundreds of hours of loneliness in the deserted city, where that sound from the radio, was the only remaining evidence that we were all still on this side of the front. For those of us who grew up there, and then, it is unbearable even now to see food thrown into the refuse bin. And there exists a myriad of other signs setting us apart from people born in peacetime.

Our mothers, most of whom were left widows after the war, had a phrase constantly repeated at the least excuse, especially when they were talking of us and our future, gathering around the table in celebrations, few as they were: "As long as there isn't a war!" They were ready to accept the lack of freedom, dictatorship, famine, heavy labour, anything other than death all around.

And surely this was the guiding principle for Churchill, Erhardt, De Gaulle, Monnet and the other creators of the European Union. The main message sent to Europe and the world by the leaders of the 1948 model read as follows: "We are founding the European Union as a union of states that have been enemies from time immemorial, so that war can never come again to Europe".

Alas, war did come again. It recurred in the very heart of Europe, in Yugoslavia at the start of final decade of the last century. At that time Europe was cheering the

fall of the Berlin Wall, celebrating the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and the victory of democracy in Russia. No-one has seriously analysed the fact that Europe paid for the collapse of the Soviet empire with the war in Yugoslavia, which, formally speaking, had for a long time not been part of that empire. The war erupted with ethnic cleansing, the bacillus of the ethno-religious confrontation between Muslims and Christians, the deaths of tens of thousands and the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people, bombing raids by the peacekeepers and a defeat for the European Union. A defeat which Europe in the person of its politicians tried to ignore, but which sowed doubts in its citizens' minds about the need for a further strengthening of the unity of Eurocracy, and later led to France and the Netherlands rejecting the single European Constitution in the recent referendum. But more of that a little later.

After long years pondering how the individual or collective social memory of war operates, I believed that this memory of the horrors of war is in itself a reliable defence mechanism, immunity against a new war. I sincerely thought like this, and said to myself and to those around me: "Look around – as long as there are people alive who lived through the war, they will not want and will not allow others to start a new one. They will pass on this memory of the war to their children and grandchildren and these too will receive an injection of the antiwar vaccine".

I remember the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Western allied countries, and how all around went quiet, listening to and gazing at the veterans, at the memory of war in those days. I remember the most powerful impression to remain with me from the 1995 celebrations was from the London celebration, especially that moment when three women, Queen Elizabeth II, the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret, stood on the balcony of Buckingham Palace and joined in singing wartime songs with the crowd of half a million surrounding the palace. It was touching and unfeigned and it inspired optimism. There were no barriers in the streets, no exceptional safety measures. The spectre of terrorism hovered in the background. The only thing that offended me, having lived through the war in Leningrad, was that at that time, 10 years ago, no-one from Russia and the former USSR was invited, neither to Normandy, nor to Paris, nor to London.

Ten years later, we were witnesses to another celebration of the Great Victory. This time, more than 50 leaders of various countries gathered in Moscow. They were guests of the Russian president, Mr. Putin, who was born a few years after the end of the war, and knows of it from hearsay, from the recollections and cautionary tales of older people, and from the cinema. This other celebration severely shook my views about social memory as an immunity to war. The show staged in Moscow's Red Square, costing millions, was not only a remembrance of the war and a gift of gratitude to the veterans, but also a pronounced nostalgia for the Soviet empire. The military units and training institutions filed in procession before the eyes of all the guests, including world leaders, under the red flags of the USSR with portraits of Lenin and Marx's slogan "Proletariat of all lands – unite".

Just as if August 1991 had never been, as if the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had not vanished under the weight of the communist system that crushed it, and had not changed into 15 independent states seeking, with difficulty, their own place in the modern world. At that moment, when I looked at the screen, watching the events in Moscow, I understood that the memory of war can act not only as immunity against a new war, but also as a very powerful mechanism for the consolidation of people, their self-identification, when other mechanisms are weakened or not working. Then the immunity to war is dangerously weakened and the self begins to see itself in confrontation with others.

The effect of this confrontation is twofold. It brings the blessing of recognising oneself as an individual, a citizen, a member of a family, a profession, a people, the human race; at the same time it introduces the bacillus of enmity – “us and them”, “us and the others”, “our God and their God”, “our land and their land”, “our values and their values”, “ours are good, theirs are bad”, and before you know where you are...

The referendum in France and the Netherlands, eurosceptics and euro-optimists, united Europe and the European Union. My deep conviction is that the peoples of these countries in the main were not voting against united Europe and the European Union. We already live in a world which is impossible to return to the divided state of 60 years ago. The inhabitants of France and the Netherlands were voting against the European bureaucracy, whose decision-making so often takes no account of the cultural and historical differences between peoples, or their everyday interests. They were voting against the sort of globalised economy that deprives them of their workplace and forces them to roam in search of work and a place to settle. In this way, they are voting against their own politicians who are ready to sacrifice the interests of today’s voters in the interests of the bureaucracy of the European Union. Finally, they were voting against a draft constitution which manifestly takes no account of all this, their *present-day* interests and the *future needs* of their children. And above all, does not take proper account of the self-identification of Europeans, their adherence to different peoples, cultures and everyday customs.

And now will you say, hand on heart, dear reader, that you are familiar with the text and content of the draft of the new constitution, and what you think will be the advantages of the European Union with a new constitution over the present one? In what way will these advantages, manifest themselves economically, and politically, in other words, how will the European Constitution prevent a dictatorship from coming to power in any of the member countries, or national or religious confrontation from occurring within or between European countries, threatening to shatter the fragile (and it is always fragile) peace?

Who has taken upon himself the burden of explaining to the inhabitants of the European countries how the European Constitution will restrain the attempts of the economies of some countries to live at the expense of others, or how it can interweave these truly complicated, and often contradictory, interests of peoples with different histories, cultures and living standards?

Even if today the inhabitants of a number of countries are voting against the draft European Constitution, they are not voting – and I am deeply convinced of this – against a united Europe. They are voting against politicians who did not take the trouble to expend effort, resources and time on a profound and multifaceted consideration from first principles of the idea of “Europeanism”, a united Europe, or the conditions for the forward march of the European peoples.

It is essential to draw conclusions from what is happening. To stop for a time, to consider what has happened. Where on the path of modern European development the strategic errors were committed, which the peoples of France and Netherlands have voted against recently and which (on the “domino” principle) other countries of Europe may vote against tomorrow.

How far is this protest voting not anti-European, but rather anti-globalist? To what extent is a vote against the European Constitution a vote for or against the participation of European countries in the invasion of Iraq, or other potential invasions? To what extent do the unfulfilled promises of European politicians arouse in a huge number of people the desire to vote against the European Constitution and do they (the voters) realise what it is they are really voting against?

Europe, after centuries of tensions, disputes and devastating conflicts between its peoples, is staging a gigantic experiment of worldwide significance. I am sure that in the whole of human history, no continent has to such an extent recognised itself as a single whole, nor has a continent set itself a task of the magnitude of that of creating a united Europe.

This experiment did not start yesterday, nor 55 years ago. Having left the Europe of the 17th to 19th centuries, a most active, adventurous and energetic group of Europeans created a new society in America, a society into which poured Asians, Africans and Latin Americans. In its own way, it reproduced the European civilisation, simplifying and complicating it, sometimes changing it beyond recognition, but remaining true to basic European principles and values. The Euro-Atlantic alliance is today, as never before, complex and internally contradictory, and, of course, it should not impose itself on the rest of the world as recklessly as do some of its leading politicians.

The most complex question of the current development of the European Union is not, in my view, the form of its consolidation nor the content of the European Constitution should it eventually be ratified. It is not even a question as to the extent of harmonisation of European law.

I believe that the main question will be the problem of the future form of the interactions of Europe and the United States of America. The choice of this form is vitally important for both sides. It is incorrect to assume that discord within Europe is to the benefit of the USA. A weakening of the European Union and its economic and political influence in the world will inevitably also entail a weakening of the role of the USA. First of all at the political level, since, as we have already said, the basic values of these contemporary superpowers fundamentally coincide. Of course, a weakening of the European Union in economic terms will bring about

a similar process in the USA, even though the economies of the USA and the European Union are in many respects competing. At the same time, they constitute a unity in relation to the rest of the world, in the areas of the utilisation of energy resources, the creation of new technologies, in military-industrial policy and finally, as regards the consumer market.[1]

Nonetheless, one wants to think that the European Union and the USA will overcome the current crisis. One wants to think that the leaders of the European Union and of the European countries will have the sense, the will, and, in the end, the analytical and cultural resources to create a constitution for the European Union which will reliably guarantee each of its members an ethnical and cultural identity, economic prosperity and peace.

I have already said that Europe paid for the collapse of the Soviet empire with a war at its centre – in the Balkans. “Every time Europe falls ill, she asks for a medical prescription for the Balkans”.[2] There is no space here and now to consider the long and extremely complex historical, cultural and, finally, military role of the Balkans and the Balkan peoples in European development, just as there is not space in these brief editorial remarks to consider the interrelations of Europe and Russia. Unfortunately, there are a number of circumstances bringing together the position of Europe in relation to the Balkans and to Russia. They are the following: a subconscious desire on the part of Europe to distance itself from what has occurred in these regions, to pay only minimal attention and make the minimum of cultural, economic and political effort to understand the events that have occurred in these areas. The building of deep and serious interrelations between a developed Europe and these two regions is often replaced by a selection of political declarations or gestures, dictated more by the immediate minimisation of effort, and the current political distribution of forces in opposition to the long-term interests of all Europe and to long-term peace.

I am firmly convinced that the war in Yugoslavia could have been averted, just as the war in Chechnya. I also believe that a democratic regime in these countries could have been more stable and stronger if, in the early 1990s, the European Union (in the person of its national leaders and European bureaucrats), instead of holding absurd debates as to how to interpret the changes taking place in the countries of Eastern Europe, in the Balkans and in the former USSR and whether they should help them in the construction of new states, had actively and seriously engaged itself to help in the creation of civic society and democracy in these countries. Even the results of the voting on the present referenda would probably have been substantially different.

Present-day Europe, imbued with, but having forgotten and long rejected ancient values, having grown up on the Christian concept of the value of the individual human being, having paid for its current concept of individual and collective freedom with millions of lives over the course of centuries, having arrived at a level of tolerance which allows people of different races, religions and cultures to exist together in this modern Europe under one roof, a Europe at the same time bearing within itself, like spores, remnants of all the cataclysms of the past, the internal contradictions, the history of wars, of the shared disasters and resentments of

the peoples who have settled there – this Europe is, like no other continent in the world, strong and ready to give the world new forms of human interrelations between religions and between countries. And it should not be thought that the differences between Europeans in their visions of the form and content of their confederation are capable of disuniting the united Europe. Everything will take its rightful place.

[1] For those of our readers interested in the interaction of the EU and the USA, I would recommend inter alia the book by Niall Ferguson Colossus. The rise and fall of the American empire, Penguin Books, 2005.

[2] From the story by Milorad Pavich The writing box.