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War as a way to detect the other and reveal the sacred (in European thinking after the Great War)¹

The article is devoted to consideration of some approaches to understanding the phenomenon of war, which were formed in European philosophy by the experience of the First World War. In particular, the author refers to the ideas of the representative of Russian religious philosophy N. Berdyaev and thinkers of the Traditionalist (Perennialist) School B. Hamvas and J. Evola. They are characterized by a special attitude to war as to a phenomenon that opens the sacred dimension of human existence and forms new ways of self-identification.

Keywords: war, Other, Sacred, identity, Traditionalism.

In 1915, Russian poet Nikolay Gumilyov (1886–1921) created the poem “Ode to d’Annunzio,” which was a response to a public speech by the Italian writer Gabriele D’Annunzio in Genoa, in which he called on Italy to join the war on the side of the Entente against Germany. In his text, Gumilyov writes that “in the days of the most beautiful war / <...> all the best that was in us / Lurking sparingly and rigidly, / All the strength of the spirit, the valor of the races, / Broke their shackles.”²

These lines are not a proud posture or a chauvinistic manifesto, especially if they are considered in conjunction with other Gumilyov’s poems dedicated to the war. On the contrary, it is a deep reflection of the

¹ The research was funded by RFBR and FRLC, Project No. 20-511-23002.

² Nikolay Gumilyov, *Complete works in 10 volumes*. Volume 3. Verses. Poems (1914–1918) (Moscow: Voskresenye, 1999), 78. (The translation of the verses, with the exception of specially stipulated cases, was made by the translator.)

personal experience of participation in hostilities on the part of one who has learned all the daily hardships of war. It is no coincidence that in another poem – “War,” one of the most famous texts of the poet, he calls the warriors “toilers ... in the fields soaked in blood.”³ It is noteworthy that this “bloody labor” in the poetic pieces of the “war cycle” is not depicted in a naturalistic way, in some terrifying and shocking details. Of course, the details are still present in the texts, often as part of exquisite metaphors, but the poet looks through them, as it were, trying to see in the war something that cannot be reduced only to its material side. We can call this view metaphysical: the poet seeks to make out a certain meaning and lofty goals in the horrors of war in general, and not this particular one (the First World War).

The poet’s contemporaries realized that such a Kshatriya view, the view of a warrior-metaphysician, was generally alien to their era. Thus, the poet and critic G.I. Chulkov noted: “...Tolstoy’s misunderstanding of war is nowadays characteristic of almost all. Only people of such a mental structure, which is not at all in tune with the new life, new culture, new religious consciousness, accept war as such, without hypocrisy, as a “chivalrous and noble state”, and not as a necessary, but always terrible evil.”⁴

It is not surprising that it was the First World War that brought people out of the captivity of positivist and progressive illusions and awakened the metaphysical search for meaning in the seemingly senseless slaughter of nations. In the situation of war both the self-determination of individuals and the self-identification of large communities become possible, and in this capacity, war certainly highlights the most important moments of human existence: it is the time when, according to Gumilyov, “the sun of the spirit bends down to us.”⁵ As we will see below, this view of the war united the Russian poet, who was subsequently shot by the Bolsheviks, and Western and Central European thinkers who had a similar spiritual attitude.

³ Ibid., 53.

⁴ Quoted from: Nikolay Gumilyov, *Complete works in 10 volumes. Volume 3*, 333.

⁵ Nikolay Gumilyov, *Complete works in 10 volumes. Volume 3*, 59.

The sociocultural identity reflects ideas about difference and sameness, which are revealed in the individual's assignment with certain groups, value systems, and action models. We can say that identity is an expression of those boundaries that shape the individuals' awareness of who they are. However, individual identity is always not only awareness about one's sameness (I am myself), but also awareness about what unites me with others. In other words, it is impossible to answer the question of "who am I?" without not answering the question of "who are we?"

Culture and society, in the words of Jan Assmann, are "basic structures" that presuppose personal identity (which, together with individual identity, constitutes self-identity), however

this does not mean that (s)he will automatically have a sense of belonging to a particular society and its culture. <...> Membership is only enhanced by reflection into the articulate form of a 'we' identity when it is deliberately brought to the surface – for example, through initiation rites – or when it rises spontaneously, for instance through a confrontation with different societies and other ways of life.⁶

We-identity does not arise in a collective automatically, by the very fact of the existence of a given collective: it is the result of reflection since initially, any community considers its way of life and its value system as the only possible one. Consequently, only contact or even collision with the Other can give an impetus to the awareness of differences and the formation of identity as a reflexive oneness of the group, *in contrast* to other groups.

We can say that socio-cultural identity is developed by defining the boundaries between mine and not-mine, and these boundaries necessarily exist in the minds of individuals who form certain groups. Personal identity is also the result of reflection, and although this latter has an individual character, it is set by those categories of self-determination that are developed by the culture within the framework

⁶ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 115.

of a particular historical “episteme” (“historical a priori”), if we use the well-known concept of Michel Foucault.

Identification is a reflection on the boundaries, the result of which are various ways of consolidating the idea of group identity in the mind. These boundaries are produced, “imagined” as something relatively stable. Without going into the details of the discussion of constructivists and primordialists, we note nevertheless that identities, in our opinion, are always constructs of consciousness. As B. Anderson wrote in his famous work, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.”⁷

The circumstances that give rise to these boundaries and intensify reflection can be very diverse, but they are always associated with the discovery of the Other. It is through the Other that we comprehend ourselves. However, otherness can be perceived in different ways: from interested curiosity and slight alertness when meeting something unknown to hostility and outright denial of what is unfamiliar and alien. Variations of the attitude to the Other require a particular discussion, here we will only point out that the Other separates, limits me & my community, denying my universality and demonstrating the fundamental narrowness of my experience, life models, value principles, closed within the border. Accordingly, enmity to the Other will be the “borderline attitude” following from the very essence of the question. The ultimate, the borderline, reveals in maximum tension what the Other essentially is for me, namely: the denial of me, while I cannot think of myself without this Other.⁸

The concept of enmity, transposed into the system of political terminology, gives us the concept of war – the ultimate form of political

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London – New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁸ Notably, the war is waged to destroy, physically or metaphorically (e.g. by assimilation) that which made it possible for the community to realize itself in its specific difference from the Other. The war is waged as if for the sake of returning to that pre-reflective stage in which the Other had not yet been discovered. The whole world must be redrawn according to “my” measure (colonization, the imposition of one’s own religion among the conquered peoples, racial politics, etc.). However, it is impossible to return to this stage, for the Other as a symbolic figure will always be present from now, even if real others are destroyed or absorbed.

interaction. If we recall Carl Schmitt, then it is precisely the clear differentiation of communities according to the “friend/foe” type that gives political quality to any contradictions of a social nature.

We understand war in two ways: on the one hand, as the ultimate form of establishing a relationship with the Other (in the abstract-theoretical sense), on the other hand, as a concrete-empirical way of interaction between communities. And in the second sense, war can be considered as one of the most important factors influencing the structuring and restructuring of the identity of the collective and the identification contours of the individual. War is able to create and change identity. This is the borderline situation in which the existential foundations of not only the individual, but also the group as a whole are revealed, and the war had an initial character in relation to the state of peace in archaic times. As G. Simmel noted, “it should not be forgotten that in the early stages of culture war was almost the only form in which there was any contact with foreign groups.”⁹

War as one of the most important phenomena of human existence and as an integral attribute of human history has repeatedly become the subject of reflection in various fields of knowledge: from the science of military affairs, which deals, so to speak, with the “technology” of warfare, to sociology and philosophy. We are interested in the philosophical aspect of understanding war, or even more precisely - its metaphysical aspect. With all the variety of philosophical writings, somehow devoted to war or interpreting some of its aspects, one can hardly speak of the “philosophy of war” as an already established research area. Rather, we should talk about its gradual self-determination, although a few works cover war on a fairly large scale from the standpoint of philosophical knowledge, for example, the books by Alexander Moseley¹⁰, Aleksandr

⁹ Georg Simmel, *Der Mensch als Feind*, accessed October 11, 2021, <https://socio.ch/sim/verschiedenes/1907/feind.htm>

(In German: “Es ist <...> nicht zu vergessen, dass in frühen Kulturzuständen der Krieg fast die einzige Form bildet, in der es überhaupt zu einer Berührung mit fremden Gruppen kommt”.)

¹⁰ Alexander Moseley, *A Philosophy of War*, (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002).

Dugin¹¹, Michael Walzer¹², Helen Frowe¹³ or Jeff McMahan¹⁴. A significant part of the mentioned works deals with the ethical aspects of war, not the metaphysical ones.

Within the framework of this article, we are interested in war as an identification mechanism, so our goal is not to analyze the possible causes of war, its socio-political determinations, etc. Any war as an existential fact carries a certain transphysical and intangible meaning, in any war it is possible to reveal the connection of men with the transcendental world, and this is what gives us the key to understanding why war helps individuals to identify and realize themselves.

The pacifist denial of war, as well as the militarist cynical acceptance of war are very superficial ideas. As N. A. Berdyaev wrote,

war can only be accepted tragically and with suffering. The attitude to war can only be antinomic. <...> A benevolent, optimistic, exceptionally joyful attitude to the war is unacceptable and immoral. We both accept and reject war. We accept war to reject it. Militarism and Pacifism are both lies, for they both mean the external attitude to life. Acceptance of war is acceptance of the tragic horror of life.¹⁵

War as an integral phenomenon is not limited to the purely material aspect, especially when it comes to how war is reflected in the minds of people. The “tragic horror” of war, the fear and awe experienced by people, allow us to assume that a religious basis in relation to war can be discerned: war is what unites people with the Sacred, introduces them into the vertical hierarchy of being. Berdyaev notes in this connection that a religious view of life sees the tragedy of death deeper than a

¹¹ Aleksandr Dugin, *Filosofiya vojny [Philosophy of War]*, (Moscow: Yauza, Eksmo, 2004).

¹² Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

¹³ Helen Frowe, *The Ethics of War and Peace*, (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁴ Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War*, (Oxford, 2009).

¹⁵ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii. Opyty po psikhologii vojny i natsional'nosti [The Fate of Russia. Essays on the psychology of war and nationality]*, (Moscow: Filosofskoe obshchestvo SSSR, 1990), 183.

positivist superficial view. The most afraid of war are the positivists, for whom the most important thing is to live well on earth and life is only the empirical given, while for those who believe in endless spiritual life, the horrors of war and physical death are not so frightening.¹⁶

It is precisely this view of war that is something most alien and rejected by postmodern thought. The metaphysical meaning of Enmity is overshadowed by the horror it exudes. This is very accurately pointed out by the Hungarian traditionalist thinker Béla Hamvas: horror is the real face of war, which, manifesting itself, instills panic in the souls of most people.

Hamvas describes a very mundane example of such a panic: irrational and uncontrollable buying up of products in stores when a war is declared. People seized with horror seek to insure themselves, but in the primordial Terror (*Ur-Angst*) they insure themselves against life, not against possible death; Hamvas writes that in this way people try to insure themselves against being, which is a threat and discontinuation of everyday routine.¹⁷

A break with this demonic state of panic occurs when a person finds him/herself in the thick of a war. “Anyone who drops out of this [panic] atmosphere and actually enters into a real war, is going through a crisis that may last longer or shorter, but in any case is very severe. All soldiers, without exception, are experiencing this crisis,” writes Hamvas. From that moment on, between a soldier, i.e. a man of war, and a civil man there will be a wall of partition, separating them forever, “because the soldier was freed from the spell of the ancient Force called Terror. The basic behavior of a domestic person in life: *Ur-Angst*; the basic behavior of a soldier is that he is not afraid of life. He gave up all insurance, <...> the ideal of a bomb shelter has lost its meaning [for him]”.¹⁸

¹⁶ See: *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁷ See: Béla Hamvas, *A háború nagysága és az ember kicsinysége. Oroszországi feljegyzések* [*The greatness of war and the smallness of man. Russian notes*], accessed October 3, 2021, <http://www.tradicio.org/trad99hamvashaboru.htm>

¹⁸ Béla Hamvas, *A háború nagysága és az ember kicsinysége. Oroszországi feljegyzések*.

In other words, war reveals a certain dimension of human life, which, as a rule, people themselves are afraid to explore. As a follower of Rene Guénon and Julius Evola, Hamvas primarily adopted their idea of a metaphysical crisis. As Tibor Palkovics rightly notes, “the crisis situation manifested in the war is inseparable for Hamvas from the crisis already given and manifested in the main structure of existence, and, therefore, from the problem of the ‘initial shock,’ ‘first lie,’ ‘decomposition of being’.”¹⁹

If war has any meaning, then this meaning is apocalyptic, in a strictly etymological sense of revelation, revealing. And it’s not just about politics and economics: human destiny with all its frightening evidence suddenly manifests itself in the entire structure of earthly reality. Hamvas wrote that

war was ‘the great philosopher of existence’ who puts man in the proper middle of Nothing – to death. And here something unheard of is happening: this setting in Nothing that teaches one to look into the dark chasm of the absolute meaninglessness and aimlessness of life and experience the nothingness of life in all its shocking bitterness, this setting and experience are not negative.²⁰

War introduces man into the sphere of the Sacred, in existentially borderline and tragic circumstances establishing our attitude to that which exceeds ourselves; war also establishes our attitude to the circle of those people for whom we take responsibility, for whom we are ready to give away our lives (likewise, war defines the circle of those whom we are ready to destroy). Of course, a person can change this relation, by going to the other side or deserting, but this is also the identification effect of the war. The true attitude of a person to war is possible only on the condition that an understanding of the need for *self-sacrifice* is formed in his mind, and this is a sacrifice in the sacred sense (lat. *Sacrificium*).

¹⁹ Tibor Palkovics, “A kárhozattól a védtelenségig: néhány szempont Hamvas Béla háborúfelfogásának megközelítéséhez,” *Tempevölgy*, 10. évf. 1. sz. (2018): 42.

²⁰ Béla Hamvas, *A szellem és a háború [Spirit and War]*, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://embers-eg.webnode.hu/news/hamvas-bela-a-szellem-es-a-haboru/>

As American researcher Michael Gelven rightly notes, “the way in which we think about the sacrifices in war cannot be exhausted by moral or political meaning but is instead understood in terms of what is sacred.”²¹ Elsewhere in the cited work, it is expressed even more categorically: “We cannot understand war, then, without understanding what is holy.”²²

Sacrifice as torment and suffering is the path to purification, without which not only holiness, but even the initial rejection of impurity is impossible. Sacrifice presupposes not only the possible death of the person but also those negative changes in his/her soul brought by the obligatoriness to kill other people – “a special burden of inevitable unrighteousness,” according to I.A. Ilyin²³.

One can approach the Sacred only through purification, and purification occurs precisely through suffering. This is the oldest idea found in all religious traditions, initiation rituals, etc. “War, for all its savagery, Gelven writes, is a deeply ritualistic thing, with ceremonies and rites and rituals; but its truest celebrations are not on the parade ground but on the battleground.”²⁴ However, there is nothing symbolic or romantic in the sacrifice of a warrior: real bullets pierce real flesh, pain caused by shell fragments is not metaphorical at all, but it is here that a connection with higher levels of being can be found: “*Real* suffering makes the holy, and that is why it is sacrificial.”²⁵

Sacrificiation establishes a connection with the transcendental – this is the most general metaphysical meaning of war as a spiritual event. As already mentioned, war overnight shifts the established reality, the usual patterns of world relations. Julius Evola described this shift as follows:

²¹ Michael Gelven, *War and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 74.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

²³ Ivan Ilyin, *O soprotivlenii zlu siloyu [On the resistance to evil by force]*, Accessed October 3, 2021, http://azbyka.ru/vera_i_neverie/o_prirode_zla/ilyin_o_soprotivlenii_zlu_siloy_21-all.shtml

²⁴ Michael Gelven, *War and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry*, 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

War explodes the routine of a comfortable life and, through severe trials, offers a transforming knowledge of life, life with death. The moment at which the individual becomes a hero, even if this is the last moment of his earthly life, in its meaning infinitely outweighs the prolonged existence spent in monotonous consumption amidst the dullness of cities. <...> War allows a person to realize the relativity of human life, and, consequently, to cognize the law of 'greater-than-life,' and therefore war always has an anti-materialistic, spiritual meaning.²⁶

Evola's metaphysical concept of war, for all its ambiguity, certainly deserves close attention, however, since the tasks of this article do not include its detailed analysis, we will focus on only two considerations.

First of all, let us note Evola's reasoning about three types of heroism, among which the highest and primary is the one that assumes that warriors "obey spiritual principles, and then heroism is born, leading to super-life, super-personality."²⁷ Of course, other modes of behavior in war and other types of "heroes" are also possible, especially taking into account the fact that any war, according to Evola, inevitably reflects the basic character of the hierarchy of society: the Italian thinker in his socio-philosophical constructions operated with the concepts of four ancient Indian varnas (brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaisyas, sudras), giving them universal significance and seeing the essence of society in the domination of one or another varna. At the same time, the true understanding of war, according to Evola, is its understanding as a path of spiritual realization. The philosopher illustrated the sacralization of war by using examples from the Bhagavad-gita (the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna before the Battle of Kurukshetra), the ancient Roman religious tradition, the practice of the Crusades, the Islamic concept of "holy war," etc.

In our opinion, one can find a kind of "residue" of a sacred attitude to war in any war, so in a sense, all wars are sacred. Even completely secular wars of the Modern era are sometimes represented in religious images: it is very characteristic that the Soviet patriotic song, created in

²⁶ Julius Evola, *Metafisika vojny* [*Metaphysics of War*], (Tambov, 2008), 9.

²⁷ Julius Evola, *Metafisika vojny* [*Metaphysics of War*], 16.

1941 by V.I. Lebedev-Kumach and A.V. Alexandrov, received the name “Holy War” despite the general anti-religious attitude of the Soviet state.

The second point on which we would like to put an emphasis is connected with the idea of earthly existence understood as a whole as military service. The origin of this idea is the famous biblical dictum “*Militia est vita hominis super terram*” (“Human life on earth is a military service”).²⁸ Evola writes:

A person who perceives his existence as a service in the army will be very far from understanding the world as a vale of tears from which one should escape, or as a circus of blind irrational events, or as an area for which the principle of *carpe diem* expresses the highest wisdom.²⁹

In the same way, the military concept of life, according to Evola, should determine a new understanding of social solidarity:

Each society will be understood in terms of a community that exists between very different creatures, each of which is determined to protect its own individuality, but, nevertheless, united in male companionship by common action without any sentimentalism. Devotion and sincerity, together with the ethics of honor generated by them, will thus be the true foundation of every society.³⁰

A person who consciously and voluntarily submits himself to the discipline of the military hierarchy in the name of gaining a higher spiritual status, but despises all forms of ‘sub-personal’ collectivism – this is Evola’s ideal.

We mainly considered above the attitude towards a war of those people who should be called combatants, using legal terminology. However, the civilian population is also involved in the reality of war, literally fused into it, and, therefore, their attitude to war plays an

²⁸ From the book of Job (7:1): «Is there not an appointed time to man upon earth? are not his days also like the days of an hireling?» (King James Version); «Is there not a warfare to man upon earth? And are not his days like the days of a hireling?» (American Standard Version).

²⁹ Julius Evola, *Metafisika vojny* [*Metaphysics of War*], 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53

equally important role in the processes of identity formatting. Whatever character the war takes in contemporary conditions (non-contact, high-tech, etc.), the mechanism of “total mobilization” described back in the 1930s by Ernst Jünger continues to operate: war is no longer only and not so much a confrontation between armies how much the opposition of entire communities.

Of course, this statement is not entirely correct, since military conflicts have significantly transformed by the beginning of the 21st century, and perhaps Jünger’s reasoning needs a certain revision, but the basic idea of his work is still quite relevant to us. At the same time, the situation of war does not at all imply an automatic strengthening of the integration of a community in its opposition to another community, since any community is internally heterogeneous, including in terms of identity, and the war produces borders not only between warring communities but also within each of them (as an example, we point to such phenomena as collaborationism or various forms of anti-war movements).

To develop a holistic model of the influence of war on identification processes (which we do not claim to do within the framework of this article), one should take into account the specific mechanisms for the implementation of reflection and the factors that set the specifics of the socio-cultural milieu in which this reflection is carried out. It is necessary to find out the nature of the main contradiction of warring communities (ethnic, religious, economic, etc.), study the processes of their interaction in the pre-war period, reveal the morphology of the social space in which the individuals implement their self-identification (that is, to determine the main social groups that make up the community, and understand the connections between them), analyze the symbolic way in which the image of the Other-Enemy is constructed, the role of official and unofficial media in these processes, etc.

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What is now recognized as a philosophical and scientific task was once revealed by poetic intuition as an existential event that requires its clarification. Actually, this event was the Great War – it gave rise

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to a real philosophy of war, perhaps for the first time, which one day would compliment us the fruits of clarity. The poet Nikolai Gumilyov probably had this in mind when he wrote:

It will be autumn, soon: I feel it.
The sun's work will be done
and people will pick golden fruit
from the tree of the spirit³¹.

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³¹ Nikolai Gumilyov, *The Sun of the Spirit*, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://gumilev.ru/languages/660/> (Translated by Alla Burago and Burton Raffel.)

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