

DESERTERS FROM THE OLD WORLD

Facing wars and other disasters



Otto Dix: La guerre

“Refuse to obey,
Refuse to do it,
Don't go to war,
Refuse to go.
If you must give blood
Give yours,
You're a good apostle
Mr. President.
If you come for me
Warn your gendarmes
That I carry guns
And that I know how to shoot.”

Boris Vian, 1954, *Le déserteur* (uncensored version).

Deserter from the war front and deserter from the workplace, desertion became more the solution, first individually and then collectively, in the face of economic and military warfare. These two fronts complemented and supported each other perfectly. Thanks to the orders of the state, the war economy provides material and physical preparation for the production and sale of goods in the arms industry, a sector that is not in crisis, while providing a stimulated and drugged solution to the economic gloom. Moreover, the climate of warmongering and anxiety helps distract the proletarians from inflation and other deteriorations in their living and working conditions.

Mobilization, and the expected nationalist upsurge, allows the reconstitution of a "unity" that aims to stifle any hint of class struggle. If, in addition, the "external" enemy can have allies or political extensions inside the country, it is bread and butter (like cannons) for false polarizations, endless variations of the historical polarization between fascism and anti-fascism. On an economic level, desertion was confused with refusal to work: from active sabotage to more or less well-organized absenteeism. In response to this refusal to work, the war economy gave rise to more requisitions and forced labor. Unfortunately, these complementary desertions are not sufficiently understood as moments of the same vital reaction against death and exploitation: one at the front and the other in the rear, combined and in solidarity. This grim reality came to light with the First World War, the first modern war in which the previously essential distinction between civilians and combatants

disappeared (Tamines Massacre), leading us by forced marches towards a culture of generalized war, theorized by the concept derived from Clausewitz, of **total war**. This war is called "total" because it involves the sacred union of all political parties, intense propaganda aimed at mobilizing the whole of society behind "their" State, in order to destroy all the resources of the opposing belligerent by combining civil and military destruction, in particular through the possible use of nuclear weapons (bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, etc.).

"A total war is a conflict whose consequences and implications are not limited to the battlefield but affects all the societies of the countries involved. The wars of 1914-1918, to some extent, and especially that of 1939-1945, were total wars. They are obviously characterized by military mobilization, but also by a total mobilization of intellectual, economic and human energies." François Cochet, *Acceptances, developments, and modalities of "total war" in the contemporary era*. Les Armées, Hermann, 2018. pp. 149–160.¹

This theory of total war would become one of the constants of mature capitalism, with the widespread development of a strong interventionist state directing and amplifying military-industrial investment. Thanks to intense propaganda, this State often relied on the mobilization of hysterical masses against a ruthless and deceitful enemy: the scapegoat. At the head of this process is a charismatic providential man (from Mussolini to Eva Perón) who embodies the purified national community, unified in the mystique of a new grandiose destiny. This exceptional man (or woman) will be the center of a personality cult, characteristic of both "left" and "right" authoritarian regimes. These are some of the typical characteristics of historical fascism (Italy, Germany, Spain).

"Fascism can be defined as a form of political behavior marked by an obsessive preoccupation with the decadence of society, its humiliation and victimization, and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity; its militants, convinced nationalists framed in a mass-based party, collaborate often roughly but effectively with traditional elites; the party abandons democratic freedoms and pursues, through a policy of redemptive violence and in the absence of ethical or legal constraints, a dual objective of internal cleansing and external expansion." Robert O. Paxton, *Le fascisme en action*, p.373, Seuil, Paris, 2004.

This set of centripetal tendencies around a "totalitarian" State works more openly to prepare for future conflicts. The whole society mobilizes then, in fear and in martial perspective (survival kit!).

"There is no longer any activity (...) which is not a production destined, at least indirectly, to the war effort. From then on, alongside the armies that faced each other on the battlefield, a new type of army emerged: the army in charge of communications, the army responsible for supplies, the army in charge of the equipment industry, the army of work in general. The commitment of this army implies a "radical requisitioning" of society, which requires organizing in this perspective even the most internal market and the most tenuous nerve of activity; and this is the task of total mobilization (...) It connects the network of modern life, already in itself complex and considerably ramified through multiple connections, to this high-tension line which is military activity." Ernst Jünger, *La mobilisation totale*², (1930).

¹On the website Cairn info: <https://shs.cairn.info/les-armees--9782705695859-page-149?lang=fr>

²Quoted by Johann Chapoutot, *Fascism, Nazism and authoritarian regimes in Europe (1918-1945)*, p.46, Quadrige, puf, Paris, 2013.

Faced with this apocalyptic perspective, desertion became the solution, first for individual survival, then as a collective organization of resistance and struggle. That is why it is important to highlight these actions of dissociation and rupture with the sacred union and the nationalist plague when they occur, because most of the time they are minimized or even ignored. In the Ukrainian Russian war, significant numbers have been recorded on both sides. It is also the case of the people of Gaza who, caught in a dramatic situation between numerous antinomian bourgeois forces, have nevertheless courageously demonstrated against the war and all belligerent, internal and external.

*"We refuse to die for anyone, for the agenda of any party or for the interests of foreign states (...). Hamas must withdraw and listen to the voice of the bereaved, the voice from under the rubble: it is the most honest voice (...) They have killed our children. Our homes have been destroyed... (We are) against the war, against Hamas and the (Palestinian political) factions, against Israel and against the silence of the world. (...) We are oppressed by the occupation army (Israel) and by Hamas."*³

Similarly, in the current capitalist war between Ukraine and Russia, desertions and insubordinations have multiplied on both sides, and many conscripts have left the country with their families.

*"More than 100,000 soldiers have been charged under Ukrainian desertion laws since Russia's massive invasion of the country in 2022. In 2024, Ukraine opened 60,000 desertion cases, twice as many as in the previous two years of war (...). About 12 people escape from military exercises in Poland every month," a Polish security official said on condition of anonymity."*⁴

According to "Le courrier International": *"After three years of war on its territory, Ukraine is facing an explosion in the number of desertions. According to the Qatari media outlet Al-Jazeera, at least 30,000 soldiers will have left the ranks by 2024 alone. That's more "than in the first two years of the war," analyzes the Financial Times."*⁵

*"The mass desertion of Ukrainian troops trained in France has highlighted the problems of mismanagement at a time when gaining ground in the war against Russia is more important than ever. On January 5, 2025, 1,700 French-trained soldiers from the 155th Brigade, also known as the Anne of Kiev Brigade, defected en masse. A journalistic investigation revealed that the troops had deserted the brigade before even reaching the battlefield."*⁶

*"This is a staggering figure, given that an estimated 300,000 Ukrainian soldiers were taking part in the fighting before the mobilization campaign began. And the actual number of deserters could be much higher. One lawmaker familiar with military affairs has estimated that it could be as high as 200,000 (...). Many deserters do not return after medical leave. Tired from constant warfare, they are psychologically and emotionally scarred"*⁷.

³Quoted in the internationalist statement by the Communist Workers' Organization (T.C.I.) on March 28, 2025. On the website Les Internationalistes : <https://www.leftcom.org/fr/articles/2025-03-30/manifestations-contre-la-guerre-%C3%A0-gaza>

⁴On the Euronews website : <https://fr.euronews.com/2024/11/30/larmee-ukrainienne-face-a-la-pression-croissante-des-russes-est-en-proie-aux-desertions-de#:~:text=Plus%20de%20100%20000%20soldats>.

⁵Stopping desertions, recruiting in large numbers: Ukraine faces a "manpower crisis," February 2025, on the Courrier International website: https://www.courrierinternational.com/video/video-stopper-les-desertions-recruter-en-nombre-l-ukraine-face-a-la-crise-des-effectifs_228016

⁶Ukraine attempts to resolve the issue of mass desertions among its troops, on the EURACTIV website: <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/ukraine/news/ukraine-tente-de-resoudre-le-probleme-des-desertions-massives-de-ses-troupes/>

⁷The Ukrainian army, facing the growing pressure from the Russians, is in the process of mass desertions, November 2024, on the Euronews website: <https://fr.euronews.com/2024/11/30/larmee-ukrainienne-face-a-la-pression-croissante-des-russes-est-en-proie-aux-desertions-de>

There are many accounts of the determination and tricks used to escape the death spiral, as well as of the perfidy of the "authorities" on both sides to send new cannon fodder to the patriotic slaughter (raids on nightclubs, unannounced checks in the street, etc.). The use of mercenaries and auxiliaries (North Korean soldiers!) is also increasingly frequent. And when some finally manage to defect, they retain in exile a constant sense of fear, justified by the apprehension of being captured or executed.

*"Ivan managed to escape a deadly Ukrainian drone strike and a sniper, according to the New York Times Magazine. He then did everything he could to avoid returning to the front lines, including faking a herniated disk. After several hospitalizations, Ivan managed to reunite with Anna and Sasha at his home in Russia. He managed to get his passport back, which had been confiscated in the barracks, after a bit of sleight of hand. A few twists and turns later, Ivan managed to flee Russia via Belarus and Turkey, before reaching a final destination not mentioned by the New York Times. Today, the family and especially Anna lives in fear of being discovered: 'the worst punishments are reserved for deserters who die in mysterious circumstances,' writes the American daily, like the pilot killed in Spain, riddled with bullets and then run over by a car. (...) Mediazona, an independent Russian media outlet in exile, has counted at least 7,400 cases of desertion from the Russian army, but this figure is undoubtedly underestimated, underlines the New York Times magazine."*⁸

Even during World War II, despite intense war propaganda polarized, in particular, by bourgeois anti-fascism, desertions occurred on a large scale and on all sides. When Germany invaded the USSR, as many as 450,000 deserted between June and December 1941.

"Soldiers from the Baltic countries who had enlisted in the Red Army deserted en masse when the Wehrmacht reached their country in July 1941. About 1.3 million deserters were rounded up (4% of those drafted) between the beginning of 1942 and the end of the war." Jean Lopez, La Wehrmacht, la fin d'un mythe, 178-179, Perrin, Paris, 2019.

According to Charles Glass, in his book "Deserters: A Hidden History of the Second World War", *"about 50,000 American and 100,000 British soldiers deserted from the armed forces during World War II."*⁹

Finally, it should be recalled that *"during the Vietnam War there were 503,926 desertions from the U.S. Army. Most deserted in the United States, but some fled to other countries."*

These few examples, gathered from various sources, unfortunately do not allow us to estimate the true magnitude of the phenomenon of desertion, nor to fully understand the implications (corruptions) and complicities that exist in society as a whole. And this, of course, is because this massive and recurrent reality contrasts with the patriotic rhetoric and the ever-increasing need to continue preparing, both materially and ideologically, for total war. **Revolutionary defeatism** was the only answer to this cataclysm - it is the **"transformation of imperialist war into civil war"**! Revolutionary defeatism is one of Lenin's most important positions and a crucial theoretical contribution. It is the only appropriate response, from the proletarian point of view to the outbreak of capitalist wars. And this is an essential element. This slogan goes back to the experience of the Paris Commune, which violently interrupted the Franco-Prussian war of

⁸Investigation into the heavy toll of desertion from the Russian army, September 2024, on the Radio France website: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-revue-de-presse-internationale/la-revue-de-presse-internationale-emission-du-mercredi-25-septembre-2024-2930782>

⁹On the website: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/books/the-deserters-a-world-war-ii-history-by-charles-glass.html#:~:text=Nearly%2050%2C000%20American%20and%20100%2C000,Some%20b>

1870, and to the 1905 revolution, which broke out to put an end to the disastrous war between Russia and Japan. Naturally, it became the revolutionary turning point during World War I, based on fraternization practices and mass desertions on various fronts. There were added refusal to go to the front, voluntary mutilations, abandonment of post, refusal of orders and direct confrontation with their own officers, etc., until culminating in fraternization with the soldiers "on the other side" and desertion.

*"To a greater or lesser extent, **no army was spared** from these revolts. All soldiers lived through the same hell and reacted in the same way to the horror. The German army, for example, had to face an upsurge in the number of mutinies in the last months of the conflict, just when the war was getting out of hand." Mutiny, disobedience, and revolt in the trenches of the Great War.¹⁰*

These movements culminated in 1917 with the mutinies in the French army and continued until the revolt of the Black Sea sailors in 1919 against the counterrevolutionary attempt to subject the Russian revolution to military control, which was also a direct product of the war. Moreover, defeatism was the only alternative to the betrayals of "defensism" and "sacred union," which completely surrendered a very important part of the Second International to the counterrevolution. Consequently, all the socialists and anarchists who, out of pacifism or nationalism, rejected this formula, which strictly delimited the workers' camp from the bourgeois camp, were guilty, to one degree or another, of treason and of compromising with social-patriotism.

"The question posed by the historical situation of the proletariat is not to choose between war and peace, but between imperialist war and war against imperialist war, i.e., civil war." G. Lukacs, Lenin's Thought, p.70, Denoël/Gonthier, Paris, 1972.

This slogan appeared in a series of articles published by Lenin and Zinoviev between September 1914 and February 1917, grouped in a publication entitled "Against the Current". Their position can be summarized as follows:

"To transform the imperialist war into civil war was the essential slogan we put forward from the beginning of the war (...). We were delighted to receive, at the end of the first Zimmerwald conference, a letter from Karl Liebknecht which ended thus: "Civil war and not civil peace, that is our slogan". N. Lenin and G. Zinoviev, Against the Current, pp. 10–11, Facsimile, F. Maspero, Paris, 1970.

Mass defections are thus the main breeding ground of revolutionary defeatism; they are its vital impulse. Therefore, not just any period is appropriate for launching the defeatist slogan in concrete terms and, above all, for organizing the application of defeatist practices at the front and in production. Beyond the importance of the propagandistic aspect, such practices require a hardened and well-established organization within the workers' vanguard. These are the objective and subjective conditions of a revolutionary period, or frankly pre-revolutionary. For the moment, these conditions have not been fulfilled at all, but we still must do the necessary work of re-exposition, clarification and political formation.

"It must be realized that this defeatism will hardly be possible until the massacre has already produced great discontent and permitted the development of revolutionary agitation, the revolutionary work itself having passed for a more or less long time into an underground phase. It is finally at the moment when the proletariat will have acquired sufficient consciousness and strength to openly

¹⁰On the BCU Library website: <https://buclermont.hypotheses.org/2743>

confront the bourgeoisie, that the defeatist acts will reach their full extent; the government will be caught between the enemy offensives and the assaults of the working class; the military defeats of the government will be added to the defeats of the bosses and the police on the terrain of strikes and demonstrations. The stoppages in the production of arms and the sabotage of the transport of food and munitions provoked defeat and panic at the front and at the rear. The invasion of foreign armies and the necessity for the bourgeoisie to make a painful appeal for peace to the enemy state would complete the creation of the most favorable conditions for the proletarian revolution. As for the victorious government, it will soon realize that there is a great danger in leaving its soldiers too long in contact with the defeatist and revolutionary movement of the invaded and defeated country." Revolutionary Defeatism, L'Internationale, organ of the Communist Union, No. 38, June 1938.¹¹

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¹¹ This fascinating analysis of one of the only revolutionary groups of the time can be read on the website: <https://www.left-dis.nl/f/defaitisme.pdf>