Love in Times of War

By: Enrique Ubieta Gómez / Special for CubaSí
19/05/2025

We arrived in Kiev in July 1978 and were temporarily housed in a Konsomol summer camp on the city outskirts. In other words, my first memories of that multinational country (I'm referring to the Soviet Union, which included a socialist Ukraine) are associated with that idyllic setting. Everything was new, or seemed to be: the damp smell of the forest, the color of the earth, the unfamiliar trees we generically identified as pines, despite their variety, but which had other names, the girls—Ukrainian? Russian?—who smiled indulgently at our still precarious understanding of the language and the unyielding Caribbean determination to blend in. It was the brief preamble to a five-year university stay in that beautiful city, far from homeland and family.

In those forests—I learned later—fighting took place during the harsh years of the Great Patriotic War. On the city streets, during holidays, elderly men and women appeared with their chests covered in medals. They were war veterans, but I never asked if they were Ukrainian, Russian, or Belarusian. Those from the Soviet republics of Central Asia were more distinct. But Kiev belonged to everyone. In the Great Patriotic War, the Homeland was Everything, every inch of Soviet land, whether it was called Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus. When a veteran boarded a bus, trolleybus, tram, or subway, the young people immediately gave up their seats. On the Ukrainian Front (this May 9, I saw its banner parade once again in Red Square), legends of heroism were woven. It was no coincidence that Soviet Ukraine was represented in the UN, and its vote counted as much as that of any member state. Kyiv was predominantly Russian-speaking, although the advertisements and street signs were in Ukrainian. The oldest buildings in the city were Orthodox cathedrals and convents. The western fringe was more nationalist. I was in Lvov. Its cemetery, with its beautiful Catholic funerary sculptures, preserves inscriptions in Polish. In Europe, the borders of almost every state have been forcibly moved more than once.

But in Ukraine, there were also collaborators who betrayed their people. It’s often ignored, but extreme nationalism is often the refuge of the bourgeoisie in the face of domestic crisis or the advance of socialism; in times of the rise of revolutionary ideology, the counterrevolution does not stop at humanitarian considerations. Nazism/fascism is not an ideology alien to or opposed to bourgeois liberalism; the difference in extreme methods responds to extreme circumstances, to the fierce instinct for self-preservation of a class and a system that needs to expand its economic and political range of influence.

Stepan Bandera (Ukraine), Francisco Franco (Spain), and Augusto Pinochet (Chile) are three clear historical examples. US imperialism felt no qualms about employing methods, let's call them "extreme," to overthrow rebel governments or nullify peoples' resistance—the physical occupation of a territory was no longer necessary; colonial subjugation is carried out with the help of dependent "vice-bourgeoisies"—from the imposition of local fascists in Latin America or the creation of Taliban armies in the Middle East, to the unlimited and amoral support, both material and political, for the Zionist genocide being carried out in Palestine. Cuban Luis Posada Carriles fits that profile: like Bandera, like his followers today, they make pacts with a foreign (imperialist/fascist) government to fight communism in their country, and they shamelessly employ terrorist methods. The concept that isn't mentioned, but that underlies the emergence of fascism and ultranationalism, is "class struggle."

But I'd like to talk about the war that imperialism (NATO and local neo-fascists) exacerbates between brotherly peoples, with objectives alien to and contrary to those peoples. A leaked video of a knife-wielding hand-to-hand combat between two soldiers, one Russian and the other Ukrainian, went viral on social media. The Ukrainian's body camera filmed the intense struggle and recorded his last words. That poignant moment suddenly restored the humanity of both: "Wait, let me die in peace," he said. "Let me go quietly, don't bother me, that's all," he added. As the victorious soldier withdrew, the Ukrainian added: "Thank you! You were the best fighter in the world, goodbye! You are the best." "Goodbye, brother," replied the Russian. War is not a war movie: dead people do not return to the dressing room. In another era, branded as dark by hegemonic propaganda, those mortal combatants would have been classmates at the University of Kiev, my classmates. The anecdote is shocking, and reminds me of the pacifist novel All Quiet on the Western Front about the First World War by Erich Maria Remarque, later banned by the Third Reich. In a trench, the German protagonist and a Frenchman are engaged in hand-to-hand combat; they know that it's either kill or be killed, that's how war is. And the Frenchman is dying in the German's arms. It's his first death. The "victor" has grabbed his wallet and hesitates to open it, but it falls to the ground, scattering photos of the "defeated's" wife and daughter, the last letters he received. The novel's protagonist "writes": "Comrade," I say to the corpse, calmly now. "Today you, tomorrow me. But if I get out of this, comrade, I will fight against all this that has destroyed us both." The dead Ukrainian perhaps believed he was defending his homeland; he didn't know he had given his life and could have taken it from others to defend the interests of the transnational corporation of hatred. There are necessary wars, like the one Martí organized for Cuban independence and to prevent the United States from expanding into our lands in the Americas, our America.

Even so, Martí spoke of a short war, without hatred. It's difficult, he knew. Eighty years have passed since the defeat of the Nazi-fascist armies, but the disease that afflicts Western hegemony is renewing itself, it seems terminal. Another world is being born. As it agonizes, it engenders monsters of despair. The Russian army parades in Red Square, before Lenin's Mausoleum. Although it bears the hammer and sickle on every banner, although the music of the Russian national anthem is the same we heard upon waking up every morning during the Soviet era when the radio began its broadcasts, the horizon is not the same. Despite this, it's up to Russia again, and to China, as it was to the small island of Cuba in 1895, so small and yet so great, to "balance the world." In the stands is a young soldier who has become a hero: he is the victor of the hand-to-hand combat on the front lines. He is very young, but he knows that he could have been the defeated, that there will be no victor as long as there are defeated. The victory of May 9 remains a symbol, a reminder, a warning. Love for one's homeland, for justice, sometimes includes, as Martí demonstrated at Dos Ríos, the willingness to die for them.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSi Translation Staff