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WAR IS   
CONTEMPT

FOR LIFE

An Essay on Peace

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Preface

*It takes a long time for people to wake up and see the truth, but once they get a hold of it, they don’t let go.  
Lay Down Your Arms*, Bertha von Suttner1

The peace museum in Hiroshima is crammed full of tourists and school groups. But it is totally quiet. There’s some whispering, someone crying perhaps, and I check once again that my cellphone is on silent, because here it is real. Like Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, the peace museum in Japan is a silent scream about some of the worst consequences of war: This is what can happen if you don’t do something now. This is the warrior’s last stop.

Big words were used when atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. It was the weapon that would end all war, as Robert Oppenheimer who led the atomic bomb development program in the USA, among others, justified and defended the creation of this weapon of mass destruction. He may have even believed it himself. The same was said about World War I (1914-1918) which killed 18 million people, wounded 23 million, and left millions more grieving and traumatised relatives: This catastrophe will lead to the end of all wars.2

But it did not end all wars. Since the end of World War II in 1945, there have been 285 documented armed conflicts worldwide.3 These conflicts are increasing in number, and are lasting longer than before.4

Since 1945, there have been more than 2,000 tests of nuclear weapons. Nine countries possess over 13,000 nuclear warheads of which about 1,800 are ready for immediate launch.5 The The Norwegian organisation Nei til atomvåpen (No to Nuclear Weapons) claims that around 2.4 million people will die or have died already from cancer as a result of nuclear bomb testing.6

During a guided tour of Hiroshima’s peace park, I was told that in 1950, when US President Harry S. Truman approved the use of nuclear weapons in the Korean War, the number of suicides in the Japanese city increased.7 For some, the notion that such a catastrophe might happen again, even if it happened to someone else, was unbearable. This was supposedly the weapon that would end all war. But when weapons exist, are they not meant to be used? Since the world is now arming itself, is it not because some believe that the weapons being produced, sold and bought should one day be used? They’re not for decoration, they’re at best intended as a quiet “deterrent” as we’ve learned to call them. But given the wars we are living with as I write, there is little doubt that the weapons around us are more devastating than deterring.

The world’s collective military spending increased for eight years running until 2022, with a current record of 2,240 billion dollars.8 This is the world’s total military expenditure, annually. Imagine it: Every first of January it starts again, another 2,240 billion dollars. “Total military expenditure” means everything in terms of equipment and personnel required to wage war or defend military: The production and development of all kinds of weapons, the salaries and uniforms for employees, foreign operations, buildings and bases around the world, fighter jets, boats and submarines, intelligence and much, much more, from research into military possibilities in space to the caring of war veterans. In contrast to global military spending, let’s remember that a Norwegian state budget is around 130 billion dollars. In 2022, Norwegian companies exported weapons, military equipment, services and technology worth almost 800 million dollars. This was 90 million dollars more than in 2021.9 Norway’s biggest weapons buyers are the NATO countries.10

643 billion dollars: The USA’s annual military budget.11 That’s a staggering 1.8 billion dollars every single day. In addition to this, the US plans to spend 230 billion dollars over the next ten years just on modernising its nuclear weapons.12

211 billion dollars: China’s annual military budget.13   
65 billion dollars: India’s annual military budget.14   
81 billion dollars: Russia’s annual military budget.15   
Countries in Central and Western Europe spent a total of 320 billion dollars on weapons and the military in 2022.16

War is a colossal industry. States invest massive sums of money in weaponry and the armed forces. And it’s paid for using my and your tax money. Warfare is highly lucrative for some. A country’s authorities permit themselves to use resources such as land, people or the state budget to put militarism into practice. Today militarism is a natural part of a market, like everything else. War has economic winners.

**The enormity of war in the smallest of details**

War is what happens to a body when a bullet perforates a heart. What happens in the hearts of those who lose their loved ones on the battlefield. What happens in the hearts of all those who have killed other people, whether they volunteered to fight or were ordered to do so. War is also trauma in the body and soul that lasts generations after peace when it one day comes. War can start for various reasons. It can be military, economic or nationalistic, but whatever the motive, before war breaks out, public hostility towards rivals can be whipped up sufficiently to make a war possible. This ends up where it often does, with just as much hostility and contempt in return – for a generation or two afterwards. Even if it’s an unusual way to put it, war is organised killing.

When we talk about war, we often talk about the big things. Big budgets. Big weapons. Big heads of state with big words. Big invasions, big victories. Analyses of war rarely mention individual soldiers, desperate civilians, or grieving mothers. There are exceptions, because there is good journalism and there are voices that tell the story.

But in general, we avoid talking about the blood, screams, charred bodies, terrified children, the arms and legs that are blown from the bodies they belonged to, the rotting corpses without names or faces – all those who are victims of the weapons being made.

The quote that opens this preface is from the book *Lay Down Your Arms*, written in 1889 by the Austrian baroness Bertha von Suttner. The novel became a surprise bestseller and Von Suttner became a world-famous and uncompromising anti-war activist at a time when soldiering and war had an aura of heroism and status. The attention and success the book garnered was partly due to her brutal and realistic descriptions of death and suffering on the battlefield, so infinitely far from the splendid uniforms, the fanfares as the troops marched away, and the tales of endless courage shown by the nation’s boys and men. Von Suttner had personally investigated what actually happened on the battlefields most people never saw, down to the smallest detail. In 19th-century Europe, it was a given that one’s son would become a soldier and fight for his fatherland, both the rich and the poor. In Von Suttner’s book, all these accepted certainties are suddenly questioned through dialogues between eager fathers who want their offspring to get out on the battlefield and terrified mothers in fear of never seeing their boys again. The novel’s protagonist, who has many similarities to the author herself, then follows the soldiers onto the battlefield, a place that was hitherto unknown to any parent or civilian:

Over the dead – over hillocks of corpses. Many of these dead show traces of horrible agonies. Eyes staring unnaturally, hands grasping the ground, the hair of the beard staring out, teeth pressed together, lips closed spasmodically, legs stiffly outstretched.17

The field doctor in the book also describes the scene:

There is something more hideous than a battlefield during the fight, viz., one afterwards. No more thunder of artillery, no more blare of trumpets, no more beat of drum ; only the low moans of pain and the rattle of death. […] There the greatest number and the most mangled of dead and half-dead men are lying, literally torn to pieces with shot […] There is a hollow way quite filled with corpses trodden into the mire. The poor creatures had taken refuge there no doubt to get cover, but a battery has driven over them, and they have been crushed by the horses' hoofs and the wheels. Many of them are still alive – a pulpy, bleeding mass, but “still alive”.18

This is just the beginning of the field doctor’s brutal depictions in *Lay Down Your Arms*. Von Suttner’s depictions in the novel are no worse than the real suffering endured in the wars of 19th-century Europe. But until she wrote her radical anti-war book, the experiences of the ordinary soldier, of doctors and nurses and all those who fought or whose job it was to retrieve and bury corpses during war, were seldom heard.

In one chapter, the soldier Frederick writes a letter, from the battlefields of the 1864 Danish-Prussian War, to his wife Martha back home:

Cannons are a terrible thing. But imagine when people in the future invent something even worse! Hundreds of scientists are bent over their experiments devizing the most diabolical war machines. The best and cheapest way to kill as many people as possible in the shortest possible time.

He ends the letter thus:

Now – as I perhaps live my last short minute, I will tell you what I think. Let a thousand others think differently, but I must say this: I hate war. All of us who are against war should gather and shout it out to the whole world – it would be a thunderous cry and the sound would drown out the cannons – “War against war!”19

Frederick survives and later tells Martha that he has screamed in terror on the battlefields. This comes as a shock to her, because the horrors of war are not what returning soldiers usually tell their loved ones about, nor what politicians tell the people.

In 1889, when Von Suttner published her book, pacifism was fairly marginal. War was considered a state of nature. So it was shocking for many to hear her say for example that the military is based on a denial of the possibility of peace, the contempt for human dignity, and an acceptance of the desire to kill. Bertha von Suttner received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905 for her fight against the horrors of war and for peace.

What does winning a war really mean? One answer to this question is: The destruction of as many people and as much material as possible on the other side. In the introduction to her 1985 essay *Injury and the Structure of War*, award-winning essayist and Harvard professor Elaine Scarry writes:

The main purpose and outcome of war is injuring. Though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and can disappear from view along many separate paths. It may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read many pages of an historical or strategic account of particular military campaign, or listen to many instalments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgement that purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves.20

Injuring a body is not an unfortunate side effect of war; it is key to the logic of war, writes Scarry. She thereby puts the injured body at the centre of understanding war, rather than the technology and military strategy of war. She makes us aware of what we are talking about when we talk about war, and what topics we rarely venture into.

In line with Scarry’s essay, we should remind ourselves that military conscription, obligates one to do the opposite of protecting; to destroy the lives of other people and everything that gives their lives any meaning. Do we talk about this to conscription-age youths? Do they even get the chance to reflect on it? Do any of us?

Scarry writes that war differs from other forms of competition in that it is not about creating, but instead about un-creating our world, whether it is about buildings, cities or, more precisely, bodies. A body that is altered or destroyed, she writes, underpins the war itself, and is necessary for war as a political instrument to function. This is the idea of ​​war, it is the very reason why one goes to war: to hurt the enemy’s people. The degree to which one manages to do this, is the marker that tells us how the balance of power is. The dead and devastated bodies in a war are what materialise the words and ideas we use to justify the war, she writes. This also applies when what’s being defended is democracy or freedom, a state or a nation.

If we want to get rid of war entirely – and some of us do – we must first start talking about what war actually is, in line with Scarry’s reflections. We must talk about and imagine what physically happens when a body is blown apart and lying in bits and pieces in a field or on a city street, as Von Suttner did in her book. Do we talk enough about how the fear and horror becomes so lodged in a young person’s body that they will never be the same again, even decades later? About how political conflicts between nations can end up causing hatred between people within a country and between countries, and destroy relationships for several generations after a war? It is almost 80 years since World War II and in Norway there are still elderly people among us who are terrified of their neighbours finding out that their parents were National Socialists during the 1940s. Some of them suffer from chronic pain after a life of undeserved shame. Because that’s what war is. Even when peace comes, it doesn’t end completely. It destroys people, both physically and mentally, and leaves trauma for generations. When we quote “war is contempt for life” from the poem *To the Youth* (1936) by Nordahl Grieg, we mean precisely that and more: the ravages of war as it happens, its aftereffects, and the suffering during peace. Ending all war should be a stated goal, but today’s military buildup suggests that the goal is the exact opposite. To believe that shattered human bodies are the way to peace is nothing more than dystopian.

[…]

END NOTES

1 From Bertha Von Suttner (1954), *Lay Down Your Arms* [Norwegian translation], p.314

2 Figures taken from the website International Encyclopaedia of the first world war: https://encyclopedia.1914–1918-online.net/article/war\_losses, also referenced on Wikipedia: https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Tap\_under\_f%C3%B8rste\_verdenskrig\_(d%C3%B8de\_og\_s%C3%A-5rede)

3 From the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). UCDP is the world’s largest provider of data on organized violence. See https://ucdp.uu.se/encyclopedia

4 Aftenposten’s article *Stadig flere væpnede konflikter, og de varer lenger* [Increasing armed conflicts, and they last longer] from July 19, 2023

5 On its website Nei til Atomvåpen [No to Nuclear Weapons] writes: “Nuclear weapons are the most powerful weapons in the world. Nine nuclear-armed states possess more than 13,000 nuclear warheads, and approximately 1,800 of these are ready for immediate launch. They can be fired intentionally, or by accident, misunderstanding or technical failure. As long as nuclear weapons exist, there is a risk of catastrophe.” https://nei-til-atom.netlify.app/ressources

6 On its website, Nei til Atomvåpen [No to Nuclear Weapons] writes: “Since 1945, over 2,000 nuclear tests have been carried out. These tests have led to a large number of deaths and health injuries. An estimated 2.4 million people have lost or will lose their lives from cancer due to test explosions. Today, more than 70 years since the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, more than 10,000 people are treated annually for long-term radiation injuries in Red Cross hospitals in Japan. About 120,000 people were killed immediately and more died in the weeks following the attacks”: https://nei-til-atom.netlify.app/resources

7 During a press conference in 1950, President Harry S. Truman refused to exclude the possible use of nuclear weapons to stop South Korea being overrun by Chinese communist troops. China had recently joined North Korea in a fierce counteroffensive. During the press conference, Truman accused the Soviet Union of orchestrating China’s invasion across the Yalu River into North Korea in an attempt to spread communism throughout East Asia. The president promised to “increase our defences to a point where we can talk — as we should always talk — with authority.” A reporter asked Truman what he would do if Chinese nationalists in Taiwan became involved in the Korean conflict. The president declined to answer. Instead, he claimed that the United States would take “whatever steps are necessary” to stop the Communist advance. Another reporter then asked, “Will that include the atomic bomb?” “That includes every weapon we have,” Truman replied. However, the president went on to say that he did not want to see it used again, saying “it is a terrible weapon, and it should not be used on innocent men, women, and children.” The incident is reported in the online magazine Politico: https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/30/truman-leaves-nuclear-option-on-the-table-in-korean-conflict-nov-30-1950-264580

8 In a press release from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI, April 24, 2023: *World military expenditure reaches new record high as European spending surges*, https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges

9 In a press release from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 2, 2023: *Eksport av forsvarsmateriell i 2022* [Exports of defence equipment in 2022], on Regjeringen.no, https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/eksport-av-forsvarsmaterielly-i-2022/id2982655/

10 Ibid.

11 NRK’s ​​article from April 25, 2022, *Verden brukte rekordsummer på våpen og forsvar i fjor* [The world spent record amounts on weapons and defence last year]: https://www.nrk.no/urix/verden-brukte-rekordsummer-pa-vapen-og-forsvar-i-fjor-1.15942970

12 The US Department of Defence, from July 14, 2023, in the document *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear F*orces, 2023 to 2032: https://www.cbo.gov/publication/59054

13 E24’s article from March 4, 2023, *Kinas forsvarsbudsjett fortsetter å øke* [China’s defence budget continuing to rise]: https://e24.no/internasjonal-oekonomi/i/onw58j/kinas-forsvarsbudjett-fortsetter-aa-oeke

14 Press release from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI, April 24, 2023: *World military expenditure reaches new record high as European spending surges*, https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges

15 In the online magazine Forskning.no April 24, 2023 in the article *Rekordhøye militærutgifter i Europa i fjor* [Record-high level of military expenditure in Europe last year]: https://www.forskning.no/forsvaret- krig-ntb/rekordhoye-militaerutgifter-i-europa-i-fjor/2188712

16 https://www.forsvaretsforum.no/europa-militaeret-russland/militaerbudsjettet-i-europa-hoyere-enn-pa-30-ar/322715

17 From Bertha Von Suttner (1908), *Lay Down Your Arms*, p. 148

18 Ibid. p. 148

19 Ibid. p. 154

20 From the essay *Injury and the Structure of War* in the journal *Representations* published by the University of California Press. Nr. 10, 1985, pp. 1-51: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3043799