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Reinaldo Spitaletta
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The stench of war

War denies man. It beastizes it. It makes it a disposable entity. It dehumanizes it.



At [the Battle of Waterloo](#), which forever marked the thunderous fall of Napoleon Bonaparte, a word was uttered (strictly speaking, two, in French) that put the defeated at the top of history, as Victor Hugo would say in [Les Miserables](#). A legion of French, which in the end was only, after the irrepressible discharges of the English artillery, a handful of men commanded by an officer without boasts or fames, would stand as a wake of light in the immense field of disaster.

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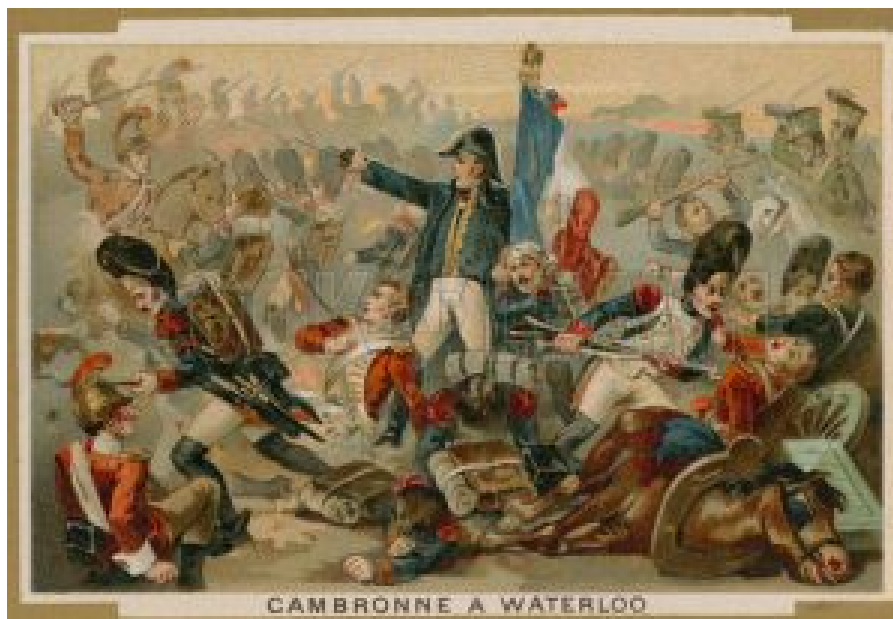
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The Battle of Waterloo was Napoleon Bonaparte's last major battle.

Faced with the picture of desolation, the victors, commanded by an English general, Colville, or perhaps it was Maitland, and seeing not only the dead enemies but so many others dying, entered into a kind of "sacred terror", as the novelist tells us. And they remained silent before the apocalyptic vision of the vanquished, who still did not admit their fall.

"Surrender, courageous Frenchmen!" the English general shouted, with respect for the death and, especially, for the survivors who were still resisting. And then, when no one expected it, the answer uttered by Cambronne, "an obscure officer", was heard: "Shit!" (*La merde!*). The narrator warns that perhaps this was the most beautiful phrase ever said by a man, a titan, a kind of hero of the language that gave war its real dimension.



For Victor Hugo it was a conversion of the last of the words into the first: "mixing in it the radiance of France, closing with insolence the scene of Waterloo with a phrase of carnival, completing Leonidas with Rabelais, summarizing this victory in a supreme word impossible to pronounce". With that eschatological word, brave for the rest, the obscure Gallic officer "reaches a Esquilian greatness". And let us remember that it was precisely Aeschylus who said that in war, the first victim is the truth.



With that word summit, the defeated was transformed into the victor. Such an exclamation, rather than a demonstration of dignity, was a colossal finding: the essence of war is that. Hearing Cambronne's defiant response, Victor Hugo continues to tell us, "the English voice responded: Fire!"



The Napoleonic wars, the wars between Greeks and Persians, the Trojan War, those here and there, the wars, such as those that existed in the twentieth century, especially the first and second, of a world character, which destroyed the edifice of reason (and reason was of

no use either), which turned man into the worst species, they are pabulum for literature and other arts, those wars, I say, are still, as always, "shit".

Now, when the historical conjuncture has once again turned war into what it has always been, we return to the words of [Carl von Clausewitz](#): "War is the continuation of politics by other means." And also to those of [Machiavelli](#): "power and strength are above law and justice." The latter are only name, theory, speculation. Nice words. War tramples on them, as it has always done.



Now, with Russia's attack on Ukraine, when it returns then (or perhaps never has gone away) information manipulation, geopolitical interests, propaganda, it is an occasion to dust off great allegations against war, as literature has done since ancient times. Not always from the tragic perspective, but comical, as Aristophanes expressed it with his [Lysistrata](#), or, in more recent times, the Czech writer Jaroslav Hasek with "[The Adventures of the Good Soldier Svejk](#)", in which one does not stop laughing in the midst of episodes of horror in the First World War.

War denies man. It beastizes it. It makes it a disposable entity. It dehumanizes it. And all these aberrations, themes of history treatises, can be noticed, with a beauty that hurts, in literature, which abounds about wars. It is necessary to return to Tolstoy, to Vasili Grossman, to Irène Némirovsky, to Manuel Chaves Nogales, to so many writers who have had war as one of their thematic obsessions.



These days so many stories about Russia, about Ukraine, have been dusted off, and there are those who have returned, say, to novels like "[The Man from Kiev](#)", by Bernard Malamud, about pogroms against the Jews. And the short poem by Miguel Hernández has been circulated: "Sad wars / if the company is not love. / Sad wars. / Sad weapons / if not words. / Sad, sad. / Sad men / if they do not die of love. / Sad, sad."

Oh, and another thing, as [Eduardo Galeano](#) reminded us some time ago: "wars say they happen for noble reasons" (ranging from God to the devil, through democracy, freedom, dignity, good works, etc ...). But, "none have the honesty to confess: 'I kill to steal'. Rather, the good Cambronne was right: war sucks.

Reinaldo Spitaletta for La Pluma, March 1, 2022

Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

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