

Research Article

Young Italians' Speeches on the War in Ukraine and Perspectives of Peacebuilding

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Abstract

In this contribution we propose a critical reflection on young Italians' discourses on the war in Ukraine and the possibilities of peace in the future. The study is part of the research proposal launched by Alistair Ross concerning the investigation about young people's socio-political understanding and values. Through the method of deliberative discussion, several focus groups were conducted with secondary school students from central and northern Italy. The conversations were collected in autumn 2022. Deliberative discussion was used as a pedagogical practice [1-3] to promote critical reflection among young people on the issue. Without giving predetermined opinions, however, we assumed that this topic was particularly present in discourse among young people. The high exposure to communications from the media, social networks, and the opportunity to follow social debates in school and family could be considered two important premises for understanding what young people think about the specific center of interest. In general, the introduction of the debate follows the problems affecting our societies today and reveals a differentiated centrality of the arguments on war and peace in Ukraine. Young people are experiencing the war in a very involved way by linking it to other countries in the world that are in conflict, they are not absent but fully participating. The causes of war are defined and possible guidelines for peace are outlined. The two geographical areas show interesting characterisations linked to the higher presence in the North of young people from families with a migratory past and Ukrainians newly arrived from war zones. The gender variable affects the analysis of the situation. Overall, the deliberative discussion shows the strong sense of reality in the young people with accentuated polarities between hope and pessimism.

Keywords: War and peace; Deliberative discussion; Secondary school; Education; Italy 2022

Introduction

The war in Ukraine raised many questions about how adolescents were processing the experience of the conflict and possible responses of restoring peace. The thinking that has matured about the war comes from direct and indirect knowledge of what is being experienced in Ukraine. The young people who have come to Italy have had direct experience of the war and talk about it with concrete examples, trying to examine their own emotions and make interpretations about the continuation of the conflict.

Young people from direct experience are fully involved in the fate of their country. A specific case concerns young people with families from a migratory background mainly from Romania. These young people participate in the conflict with their own considerations constructed considering their own migration background and the experience of being part of the invasion. Some recent surveys on young people's interest in the war say that young Italian adolescents inform themselves and try to understand what is going on.

They read up on national news and also on major social issues. They are attracted to international news that affects them most closely. They are interested in the war in Ukraine and international political balances because of the effects on their lives of study and work. Young Italians have an indirect experience of the war, and their discourses reflect the situation experienced through information circulating on

smartphones, social, and the Internet. Highly followed are Instagram and Facebook. Scarce is the use of newspapers and television [4].

The Harms of Conflict on Adolescents

Several studies document the psychological and mental damage in the personality development of adolescents at a crucial stage of their growth.

During war, adolescents are exposed to atrocities, organized violence, disintegration of social networks, and resettlement during crucial phases of their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. These experiences could cause serious risks to their physical and psychological well-being and development [5].

Maftai A, Dănilă O and Măirean C [6] emphasize the role of the media in producing the perception of threat in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The feeling of threat particularly affects adolescents who are poorly protected from even false messages. European Parliament reports record the damage to education.

At the same time, education has been disrupted for more than 5.7 million children in Ukraine, as schools shut down at the start of the war. National online education platforms have been built to help children to follow their schooling programmes, yet the situation remains difficult. Security concerns accompanied by a lack of access to electricity and internet make access to education services a

challenge. Some schools have reopened by means of distance-learning programmes. In addition, Ukraine's neighbouring countries and EU Member States are supporting the integration of Ukrainian children into their national education systems [7,8].

There are teenagers who experience the war from within and teenagers who witness the war. For both categories, the war event creates a sense of uncertainty and there is a growing distrust in governments and in the political capacities to face the problem. It follows that two ways of intervening to support young people emerge: the treatment of trauma and the search for credible solutions that go in the direction of actions of humanitarian solidarity.

Research Methodology

The exploratory research of a qualitative nature that we present in preliminary form is still in progress. The final results will be fully available with input from other countries that have joined the initiative launched and coordinated by Alistair Ross. This initial consideration does not compromise the course of subsequent processing of the results collected in the deliberative discussions. The survey concerns the recording of speeches by young Italians and non-Italians present in Italy on the topic of war and possible peace solutions.

Through deliberative discussion as a pedagogical practice we sought to understand the thoughts of a sample of 18 students of secondary school gathered in three focus groups with six students each in October 2022. Two focus groups were conducted in a secondary school in central Italy from a small town with a population of 11,899 (2021), and the third focus group was conducted in a secondary school in northern Italy in a mountain town with a population of 12,319 (2017).

In both cases, the social location of the local population is predominantly working and middle class. There are five students in the three focus groups with family migration experience from Albania, Romania, and Ukraine. The conversation took place in one hour for each group consisting of ten males and eight females between 15 and 19 years of age. Students are referred to by pseudonym while keeping the gender of the original name.

Sample of Schools

Descriptive data of the sample of schools are disclosed by the schools' websites and the Ministry of Education, National Assessment System. Social Reporting 2019/2022. The Central Italy School Institute is a Catholic private school, is committed to building an educational community of supportive people with very strong ties. The Institute has been operating for 150 years it is a non-profit Social Cooperative Society, accommodates around 300 pupils from various parts of the Castelli area of Rome, mostly middle-class families. The boys and girls who enroll at the Institute have experiences of school dropouts and learning difficulties, and the school offers a specific service to encourage study and school careers.

The territorial scope School Institute sampled in Northern Italy is that of the Mountain Community Valtellina of Morbegno (496 square kilometers). It also includes the school population of the districts in the province of Sondrio, Chiavenna, Lecco and Como. The socio-

economic context is the alpine valley where a rapid transformation has taken place from a largely agricultural-mountain economy (still 41 percent in 1951) to a mixed economy, based on a significant industrial consistency, challenged by the current crisis, with a large presence of artisan companies and a growing development of the tertiary sector.

The cultural reality, slower to undergo transformation, still suffers from the past social structure, typical of an Alpine agricultural economy, and the partial geographical and political isolation of the area. The following are being improved: communication routes, the spread of transportation, access to media, university study. Integration with the Lombard, national and European sociocultural reality is being sought. The limited availability of economic resources persists, the uncertainty of being able to use them permanently and the distance from institutional and university centers prevent medium- to long-term planning on innovation and staff training. In the school population are indicated youth distress, addictions, situations of socioeconomic, cultural disadvantage, increased entry of pupils with migration experience.

Descriptive Aspects

The conversations were held in a way that started from the survey from the major interests of young people on national and international social reality. COVID-19 remains a strong topic of discussion from the perspective of the consequences generated by isolation with difficulties in resuming the daily rhythm. The topic of the war in Ukraine immediately emerges as a source of concern, fear, uncertainty and sometimes as an argument not to talk about for political reasons.

As directed by the research team, the conversation could develop on the interest the students showed in the war, their assessment of the events, consideration of possible upcoming actions both at war sites and elsewhere, emotional involvement, and a sense of participation in the ongoing debate. We encouraged the expression of different positions and invited them to try to put themselves in the shoes of those who are experiencing the conflict firsthand.

We can collect the first reconnaissance on the recordings into five thematic areas:

- I-the general view of the war;
- II-the consequences of the war;
- III-the causes of the war;
- IV-the conditions for peace;
- V-the personalization of war.

In the first two subject areas we collect ideas on the meaning of war in human affairs and examine the implications on one's present and future existence. In the third area we collect thoughts on the reasons for war, reasons near and far, experienced indirectly and directly. In the fourth area we extrapolate discourses on the possibilities for peace in political, social, cultural, and strategic terms. In the fifth area we find what emerged in front of the stimulus suggestion "if you were in that war what would you do?". We talk about personalization as a cultural anthropological attitude of putting yourself in the shoes of others and trying to feel in a time and place different from that of one's daily life.

The General View of the War and Controversial Positions

The students' discussion rescales the war in Ukraine by relating it to conflicts that are in different places on Earth such as in Asia, Africa, and Europe. The difference is that it is not talked about with the same frequency and the fallout for Italy is different in proportion to military and political involvement. The phrase "wars have always been there" meets with general approval as if to mitigate the trauma of the conflict in Ukraine. However, according to Antonio, conflicts could have been predicted and avoided. In the world scenario now, conflicts can no longer be avoided because they are due to events that have occurred over time and even if there were agreements "they would just be pieces of paper, each nation does what it wants, what is most favorable economically, it is ugly to say, however, at this moment it is like that for every state" (Marino).

Agreements are not assigned trust because they are not respected, and Russia and NATO are mentioned as examples. A portion of the students agree that Russia is not to blame for the war "...Russia is not to blame for today's war. Italy sells weapons now, but the war was already there for years." (Leopoldo). Responsibility for the war is a controversial issue with respect to the two contenders.

Russia defies the other powers and takes advantage thinking that the other nations cannot do more regardless of the consequences...it is a wrong thing...the blame is not only on Russia but also on other States such as America that did not do certain things that Putin wanted, so it came to this time of war. (Franco)

Gianni sentences:

Mainly it is a kind of American invasion. Biden established military bases along the territory and thus triggered the reactions of Russia, which is now trying to regain Ukrainian land that has declared itself independent in a completely illegitimate way, not to mention what they are doing in the Donbas where they are massacring the urban population without anyone talking about it.

For several of the girls, one of the most unacceptable aspects of the conflict in Ukraine is the presence of the boys who are conscripted and at high risk of their lives due to inexperience and lack of preparation.

Martina observes

Kids our age are risking their lives every day when there should be people suited for that field, if I am in the military, it is because I am suited for what I am doing. I can't put a weapon in a kid's hand and expect him to try to save someone.

Judgment about war is made with a high sense of empathy, and thinking about boys their own age going into combat generates feelings of contrariness felt especially by girls. For boys, the position is clear about the legitimacy of defending one's home. The nuclear call is felt as a real threat that subjects all States to the power of the most powerful weapons.

Probably this war of Putin's could be a show of force in the sense that threats about nuclear and bombing could overthrow a nation in minutes with the weapons and technologies that the State possesses today; I think it's a hasty war, done unreasonably, it's more of a show of

force and it makes people realize that today a State can start a war in a very short time without any particular reason. I don't think making an alliance against Russia and getting in Russia's crosshairs is the smartest move to make because it can be scary to go against a country with nuclear power. (Antonio)

The Consequences of War

Three clear positions emerge in this thematic area:

- (a) the assessment of the negative material consequences of war;
- (b) the global involvement in the consequences with a strong emphasis on the interdependence of all countries in the world;
- (c) the empathetic assessment of war.

There is a unanimous opinion that war makes people live badly: taxes rise, there is no peace of mind, there is fear of it coming our way, and the risk is scary. The damage and disruptive effects are cited for increased pollution, the downfall of the economy, the aggravation of the environmental issue, and the fallout on incoming migration. Conversely, there is the strengthening of Russia's economy as it seeks alliances with other countries.

There is a state of anguish for students who view war as wrong but inevitable. The war serves no purpose, young people anticipate paying the consequences, and some reflect "the elders say this war is not as bad as World War II" (Giovanni).

Lia talks about the need for compromise because

Nuclear possession indicates inequality. You can't make an agreement because now the situation has degenerated, the whole world is involved a little bit...even other countries can't influence this war however there are consequences, for example, on primary goods and so it's not just about the war, this is a problem that ultimately affects everyone.

Of the same opinion is Filippo

War calls for war, there are people who direct entire populations even quite important not only politically but also economically, there are people in power who try to maneuver to bring everything to themselves, without thinking that there are millions of people at stake; unfortunately, power is something that brings war.

Franco states the consequences are all negative...buildings destroyed...the integration of the Ukrainian people...Russia also spent a lot of money, lost a lot of men, at the end of it all there will be a negative balance sheet. And also, for other countries the balance sheet will not be positive because in some way we will also lose out.

According to Alberto, it is a matter of choosing an appropriate technical strategy considering the many political, economic, social contradictions that show division rather than union and show how each country eventually closes in on itself despite the fact that the European Union tries to work for the integration of peoples.

I simply think there is a need to change the methodology, because yes we have put sanctions on Russia, but at the same time we have not stopped buying from Russia; in fact in the last six months we have

given enough supply, enough money from the European Union to cover a whole year from the time the sanctions started; so yes we have given sanctions but at the same time also enough money to Russia, so it is counterproductive; and also the fact of relying on the United States, yes we are buying from the United States but at the same time however the United States is thinking about itself; there was a few months ago where Italy asked for help from France but France is thinking about itself, it refused cooperation so it is a difficult situation.

The lessons learned from the behavior of politicians lead the young people themselves to take positions of self-protective closure that save determined support for welcoming and humanitarian aid, while condemning the sending of arms.

Antonio states:

I think our concerns should be more about ourselves, our Italian State. You can't think about waging war when there is a State that is completely at a loss. Alberto spoke earlier about workers: this is one of the many flaws in the Italian system that before we think about external factors that, for now, would not have affected us directly if we had not gone to sell weapons in Ukraine. Rather than thinking about external factors that do not directly affect us we should think about fixing our country. Always hoping that with the current government soon to be in office, we will try to fix the country Italy before thinking about Ukraine, always welcoming those in need and lending a hand, however certainly not to the war industry.

On the level of empathy Sara says.

I think that also on the cultural level there are many problems. In Ukraine many people have lost their loved ones, they have been forced to leave their country not by their own choice and so they are in a situation of pain.

The debate develops around the issue of big and small war with articulated positions. "For me war serves no purpose, I have seen that there are some wars that are ultimately necessary...by making a small war, like now, you avoid one that could involve so many countries" (Gianni).

Sara assesses the group's opinion not distancing herself from it but looking with concern at the people victimized by war, she is caught in an existential rethinking that generates a contradiction between agreeing to rank wars and taking note of the consequences of war:

In my opinion it is right what my comrades said, however, there cannot be a war either small or big; even if they are few people, they are people who have always suffered, they are survivors, small children who have experienced trauma..., in my opinion it is not really right.

The Causes of War

The major causes of war indicated by the students are economic, military, political, ethnic, assertion of power and force, and media.

According to Alfredo

This emergency situation is due to both poor contracts between Nations for gas supply and the senseless use of the resources a country has; for example, Italy has resources in the Adriatic Sea that it could use precisely for its own or Italian use; instead it wants to make contracts

with Russia, after those with the U.S. have expired; I think the Italian State is not in this great crisis with the objective reserves of gas, but just makes its citizens pay for it. Certainly, in every war there is always an economic interest; I think economics is one of the fundamental reasons for war. Those who start the war almost always seek economic advantage and also put all other countries in the world in trouble not only the attacking country. In this situation Russia is economically stronger than the attacking country, Ukraine. The other countries in Europe and America suffer economically from the war; in fact, gas and food prices rise, you cannot buy more of the same kind of products.

Alberto from Romania has a broad view of the causes of the war:

I think the causes of this war are more complex. Since before 2014 there have been tensions going back to medieval times, not only political but also ethnicity. We are talking about Russian imperialism, now we are talking more about propaganda, a part of the Russian population thought they had the right to take parts of what had been the Russian empire, or the Soviet bloc. The Soviet bloc was not a completely united entity, it was simply multiple countries cooperating Ukraine, Crimea. We experienced it too, to make a connection with Romania, with Moldova where there are clashes with Transnistria, they want to keep it as a puppet state. Fortunately, since the president is no longer pro-Russia, the union vote with Romania has gone up from 20 percent to more than 50 percent, so hopefully in the next few years we can take back our brothers; therefore, get back what was taken from us long ago.

Gianni says the causes of the war are military because "America tried to regain advantage with military bases and Russia reacted by attacking Ukraine" and also media because of the persuasive force of the mass media.

The Conditions for Peace

The conditions for peace appear rather impractical. "As long as the two sides are at odds, nothing can change" (Matilde). Compromise, negotiation is not currently possible. Everyone remains with their own ideas. Fear of nuclear power, inequality between the parties has led to the degeneration of relations. An agreement could be made with Russia. About the mediation of other countries, it is believed that Italy occupies a secondary position in the international framework.

The world powers with sanctions have to decide. In some cases, it is thought that peace depends on the will of people. According to Sara

Citizens should have an open revolt against the people with the most power, only if they have all this power, it's because the citizens gave it to them; so as much as they can do, they can't have a say, it would be kind of going against what they themselves decided.

Some help could come from psychological support, caring for social relationships. According to Concetta:

From the psychological point of view Ukrainians could be supported by people who could help to overcome the traumas that this war has left; for example, people who have seen their loved ones die in front of their eyes; therefore, help them through a psychologist to overcome certain situations, to move on and avoid remembering, stand by people.

Karen lives in Italy and has relatives in Ukraine and thinks it is necessary to give war aid and social aid to her country.

Alberto states:

A near peace I think is not a very feasible request also because given the current conditions I don't think Ukraine will leave the land annexed by force by Russia, especially with the EU and NATO supplying it with armaments; at the same time Russia after taking this beating that they didn't expect such support from NATO towards Ukraine, nor the fact that more troops were needed, I think will continue to conquer Ukraine in full, will continue this expansion. A few months ago, there were secretly sent videos where one of Russia's generals was pointing out on a global map the smaller countries to be annexed, such as Moldova and Transnistria, in order to have more control over the Black Sea. I think it will become a war of attrition. If Russia wins it will be even worse economically than what happened after the fall of communism also from a social point of view compared to all the other countries. In case Ukraine wins, the outcome will be about the same, but with more dead civilians and a greater need for reconstruction; in any case it will not end well for either side.

The Personalization of War

The stimulus question for the conversation was "If you were in Ukraine what would you do?" The answers fell into three broad categories of those who would never leave the country; those who do not want to be further involved in the events of the war; and those who suspend judgment in the face of an experience too far removed from their everyday lives. Franco says, "In my opinion there is little to do or help the country and fight to defend all ideals or emigrate and find refuge in a country that can take me in."

Opinions of drastic political change come from Gianni

If I were in such a situation and given the ability, I would start a popular uprising to remove Zelensky from power because he is the cause of the war, he keeps rejecting Russia's peace proposals, he rejects treaties also because of his enslavement to 'America; therefore, he is more of a problem for Ukraine than a sticking point.

Concetta argues the relevance of the war debate among young people to form their own ideas with the difficulty of discriminating between news that might be altered by the mass media

It is talked about a lot; in the news it is a very frequent topic. By talking about it we become aware of what is happening in the world, we can create our own idea. We are not there, everything is reported to us, we are not there so we don't even know the truth, we may get news that is not true.

Overall, the student population is split on the choice to stay, especially by males, and to emigrate especially by females. Family protection conditions and perceptions of the continuation of war without peace solution also impact.

It was asked what they would do if they could have a billion at their disposal and the unanimous answer was to provide social facilities, hospitals, schools, roads, no funding they would give to wars and the powerful of the Earth. The word "genocide" emerges to describe the situation in Ukraine.

The future is uncertain and dense with fears, with a low level of hope, there is a need to run for cover to ensure the supplies that are lacking.

Conclusions

Young people express a sense of helplessness and concern for the future; the war challenges the values of justice and solidarity. Young people feel the negative repercussions on Italy with a split between those who feel the Ukrainians are a burden, those who speak of plausible reasons from Russia, and those who feel they cannot say anything.

On military spending, there are those who complain that Italy is only now noticing the war in Ukraine while it has been there for years. "Italy sells weapons now but the war was already there for years" (Concetta) and for Alfredo.

Italy found itself in a situation in which it had to sell arms to Ukraine and therefore have an economic incentive and I find it an injustice that they are only talking about it now, just as I find it an injustice that they do not talk about other conflicts. Probably Putin's war could be a show of strength in the sense that the threats he makes on nuclear and bombing can overthrow a nation in minutes with the weapons and technologies that the state possesses today; I think it's a hasty war, done in an unreasonable way, it's more of a demonstration of strength and it makes us aware that today a State can start a war in a very short time without particular reasons.

Karen and Dina agree that their families in Ukraine are a constant cause of concern for them, which is why they are in favor of any kind of help.

The strong sense of relativization of war "war is everywhere" balances Italy's sense of reality of impotence and the action of delegating the problem to the greats of the Earth. War awareness is high in all students. Young people from Eastern Europe experience the war as the age-old history of their family, while for other young people the international scenario has a decisive influence on the evolution of the conflict. In terms of European values, we note a low relevance of Europe as a custodian of a culture of peace and guarantor of human rights.

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