FRIEDENSNOTE NR. 12

In the Cycle of War

In her peace song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”, Joan Baez sang of the senseless death-spiral of war, from which humanity has so far drawn no lesson.

When Ulrike Guérot was asked to choose a song for “Friedensnoten” and to contribute a text, Joan Baez and her still magnificent song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” immediately came to mind. The song was written as early as 1955 by folk veteran Pete Seeger and has since been adapted many times.

There is also a German version – “Sag mir, wo die Blumen sind?” – but the Rubikon author finds the English version, as the original, far more beautiful – needless to say.

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SONG	Where Have All the Flowers Gone
PERFORMER	Joan Baez
ALBUM	Joan Baez in Italy, 1967

In the 1970s I was still a very young girl, but the scent of Woodstock, the hippie cult that spread to Europe too after the festival and because of the protests of the time against the Vietnam War – that you could breathe in even as a young girl, even if you couldn't really grasp it.

Joan Baez must have been on the radio often; I remember that soft and yet penetrating voice, American folk at its finest, a voice like a bell, so pure and bright and clear.

"Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" is a gentle song, not accusing, only asking. The word war does not even explicitly appear; it took me a long time to understand what this song, which is really a round dance, is about.

First the flowers disappear – "where have all the flowers gone" – then the girls – "where have all the young girls gone". Then it asks after the young men – "where have all the young men gone". The young men, the lyrics go on, have put on uniforms and suddenly became soldiers. At the end of each line it asks: "When will they ever learn?"

The soldiers become graves, on the graves new flowers grow, new girls pick them and give them to new soldiers, who again go off to war, and so on and on.

Joan Baez sings of the despair that it always goes on like this, or rather always starts again from the beginning, although we do know this martial round dance and know how terrible wars are – yet all of that is to no avail. The song is plain; it sings, in very simple words, of the human inability to learn from catastrophes.

During the Vietnam War the magnificent Joan Baez flew to Vietnam with her guitar and – singing – placed herself in front of the tanks. Through this she became, and remains to this day, an icon of the American peace movement, one we would wish still existed today. A beautiful, courageous woman, the idol of a country that once understood itself as the "Land of freedom and liberties", which, sadly, it has long since ceased to be.

The American implications in the current war in Ukraine are by now unmistakable and undeniable, even if it was Russia that formally started this war. One would wish for a Joan Baez in Kyiv, singing on the Maidan once again – this song and many others of her wonderful songs for peace.

I chose this song above all because it describes precisely that martial round dance, that tragedy of forever starting over, as if war belonged to human existence, as if it could not be avoided, not stopped, as if it were almost fated in its repetition, meant to teach us something – but people will not, or cannot?, learn ("When will they ever learn?").

This not-being-able or not-wanting to learn is all the more tragic given that it was, after all, the European project that was founded on the rubble and ashes of the European wars from 1918 to 1945, with that very mission, that mantra: **“Never again war!”**.

How often was this mantra repeated in the European speeches from 1950 to 2020, when we had just celebrated 70 years of the European Union, 70 years of the European peace project?

That of all entities Europe, the EU, has now blindly taken sides for Ukraine, that the EU states may, via NATO, want to intervene actively in the fighting in the autumn, instead of hanging the blue flag with its twelve stars and doves of peace on every balcony from Lisbon to Helsinki and organising flash mobs with Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” in every European city – this points more to a betrayal of the European idea than to Europe defending its values in the Ukraine war, as is generally claimed.

> “All *men* shall be *brothers*”,

as the European anthem goes.

Russians, too, are part of mankind!

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THE SONG IN ITS ORIGINAL · YOUTUBE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ulrike Guérot, Jahrgang 1964, studierte Politikwissenschaft, Geschichte und Philosophie in Bonn, Münster und Paris. Sie ist Professorin, Autorin und Aktivistin zum Themenbereich Europa und Demokratie. 2014 gründete sie das European Democracy Lab e.V., eine Denkfabrik zum Neudenken von Europa.

Ihr 2016 erschienenes Buch „Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss: Eine politische Utopie“ wurde zum europaweiten Bestseller. Zuletzt erschien von ihr „Wer schweigt, stimmt zu: Über den Zustand unserer Zeit und darüber, wie wir leben wollen“.

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