

## Peace and Profitability: A Function of War in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*

### **INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

This essay explores the interaction between the Swedish Sergeant and Recruiting Officer at the outset of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. I start my analysis with the Sergeant's understanding of peace as the absence of organization rather than the opposite of violence. Through this distorted definition, war is positioned as society's saving grace, a system of law and order functioning to bring Dalarna's society to an alleged peak performability impossible during peacetime. I challenge this position by reintroducing the effects wartime violence have on society and demonstrate how "organization" is simultaneously conflated with profitability for the two men. For them, war is better understood as an economic exploitation of violence and peace as the absence of profits. I find this comparable with the continual growth of industrial military complexes today.

### **PEACE AND THE ABSENCE OF ORDER**

In his conversation with the Recruiting Officer about war, The Sergeant opens by discussing his notion of disorganization during peacetime. According to him, people in peaceful cities are less likely to follow strict principles of order, resulting in the stultification of their society: livestock are left unchecked, the population isn't clearly accounted for, people indulge themselves, and the community wastes its economic potential (sc. 1). In contrast, the Sergeant believes the opposite is true during wartime. War structurally functions to reorganize and revitalize society. This alleged reorganization is not something coincidental, but directedly tied to war's very nature. Practically speaking, this could be seen in the implementation of preparatory practices (stacking shoes, registering all the names, bagging the corn, etc.) that must be considered in case of attack during wartime, but not necessarily during peace. Without the "push" of the war to encourage these practices, the Sergeant says they won't happen since "no one gives a damn" (sc. 1). For him, the war is essentially a *service* for society that should not only be praised, but should come to Dalarna soon.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Samuel French, 2010) included with in-text citations to the scene.

### **WHAT ABOUT THE VIOLENCE?**

Categorizing “organization” as a binary opposite to peace, however, does not adequately treat the reality of wartime violence. If peace reflects a “disorganization,” it simultaneously reflects an opposition to the bloodshed and pain inherent to war. While the Recruiting Officer and Sergeant might not have to pay particularly close attention to this, considering they assist the war efforts away from the battlefield, townspeople and peasants who directly interact with the war as soldiers or civilians in war zones are deeply in danger.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, the Sergeant’s perception of “organization” as an inherent benefit of war cannot relate to the displaced and persecuted. As seen in Mother Courage’s journey, she often struggles with keeping her children out of danger and, by the end of the play, all three of them face war related deaths. This ultimately calls into question the motivations behind the Sergeant’s comments.

### **PEACE AS UNPROFITABLE**

Considering that the Sergeant overlooks violence and praises the structure of war for its “organizational” forces, it is pertinent to further explore his dialogue with the Recruiting Officer to see how war individually benefits the two of them. The first and most obvious answer is that war provides them an income. As members of a national military, the Sergeant and Recruiting Officer are economically dependent upon the perpetuation of war. Having been commissioned to “slap four platoons together by the twelfth” (sc. 1), the Recruiting Officer gets a painful look at how hard it might be to fulfill his duty if towns stay as peaceful as Dalarna. Even as he unethically gets potential recruits drunk to trick them into signing up for the war, his efforts are useless. This differs drastically from wartime where “everyone’s names on a list,” and he could more easily find soldiers. As the Sergeant tell the Recruiting Officer, “Peace is one big waste of equipment,” a phrase with two meanings<sup>3</sup> that I read in relation to their situation: Peace is one big waste for soldiers and the military complex as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> For two examples, see Eilif’s discussion with his commander about the tiresome work of “skinning peasants” in Scene 2 and the wounded peasant Katrin attempts to help in Scene 5.

<sup>3</sup> My reading of this phrase is more of a subversive one. In the context, the Sergeant is referring to the *society* as a piece of equipment, an idea that also reflects his economically directed mind.

## **WAR AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA**

The Sergeant and Recruiting Officer's economic reliance upon the system of war and subsequent need to promote its alleged organizational benefits extend into contemporary military complexes today. Writing as an American, I connect their perceptions on the nature of war with rampant militarization in the United States. Circulating hundreds of billions of dollars each year, the U.S. military-complex is continually dependent upon promoting its own necessity.<sup>4</sup> This has taken the form of "preventative" measures in terms of weapons production, as well as the perpetuation of artificial wars. Similar to the juxtaposition between peace and organization as presented by the Sergeant, the U.S. has historically justified on-going military operations in other nations under by positioning themselves as "organizational." As seen in the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan between 1991-2021, the very structure of war was presented as a stabilizing force, a system of law and order allegedly meant to bring Afghanistan to a "peak performability." As discourses on the military's "organizational" abilities were promoted, the United States' industrial military complex grew more powerful while instances of real violence were not given the same attention.<sup>5</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The conversation between the Sergeant and Recruiting Officer in *Mother Courage and Her Children* speaks to the way war's "benefits" are highlighted over its violences. As professional soldiers surviving off Sweden's wars, peacetime is understood by these men as something negative – a disorganizing structure that hurts society – and wartimes as a public *service*. By looking at the dialogue between the two men, I have emphasized their need to promote war to ensure *they* are not "wasted" by peacetime. In contemporary America, the same is true for the industrial military complex and its many participants – too much money and time has been poured into the "equipment" that nothing but the ceaselessness of war is allowable.

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<sup>4</sup> The U.S. defense budget is over 800 billion dollars, not including other war-oriented markets (i.e. arms and weapon manufacturing) that develop alongside it.

<sup>5</sup> See Leoni Connah, "US Intervention in Afghanistan: Justifying the Unjustifiable?" *South Asia Research* 41, no. 1 (2021): 70-86, DOI: 10.1177/0262728020964609. Connah discusses how the strategy of "Just War Theory" was used by the U.S. to allow their continued presence in the area. Included in this was the belief that the U.S. military could turn the country into a democratic society (73), an idea I directly relate with my discussion on war's alleged "organizational" abilities. Without considering the money U.S. arms dealers profited through this War (though this plays a direct role in the perception of war's function), the U.S. directly gained power by reinforcing their image as a sovereign state (73). The backdrop to this was the death of 32,074 Afghanistan citizens between 2001 and 2018 (78).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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