Article

Russia vs. Ukraine: Geopolitics in the Sphere of School Geography Through the lens of Totality

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Russia vs. Ukraine: Geopolitics in the Sphere of School Geography Through the lens of Totality

ABSTRACT:

Considering the evolution of epistemological thought in geography, it is essential to recognize that no local reality can be understood in isolation. In the current stage of capitalist internationalization, geography employs the concept of socio-spatial formation to analyze how places are historically shaped through their interconnections with the global scale, driven by economic and geopolitical forces. Within this framework, the discipline adopts the category of totality, extensively developed by Milton Santos, to explain how local dynamics are influenced by broader regional and global processes. This article aims to develop a theoretical-methodological approach for geography education based on the concept of totality, enabling students to critically engage with the Russia-Ukraine conflict as part of the school curriculum. To achieve this, we employ a bibliographic review of geographical epistemology, anchored in a broader geopolitical discussion. We propose a pedagogical practice designed to explore this conflict, emphasizing its tangible effects on students' daily lives through the lens of historical materialist dialectics.

Keywords: school geography; geopolitics; war; epistemology.

Rússia e Ucrânia: geopolítica no âmbito da geografia escolar sob o olhar da totalidade

RESUMO:

Considerando o desenvolvimento da epistemologia da ciência geográfica, é crucial reconhecer que nenhuma realidade local se explica por si mesma. No atual estágio de internacionalização do capitalismo, a geografia utiliza o conceito de formação socioespacial para compreender como os lugares são moldados historicamente a partir de relações com a escala mundial, dinamizada pela economia e geopolítica globais. Desta forma, a geografia dispõe da categoria de totalidade, amplamente trabalhada por Milton Santos, para compreender como o local é afetado por escalas mais amplas,

seja regionalmente ou mundialmente. O objetivo deste artigo é desenvolver uma proposta teórica-metodológica para o componente curricular de geografia a partir da categoria de totalidade visando a compreensão do conflito entre Rússia e Ucrânia enquanto conteúdo escolar. Para tal proposta, utilizamos como método uma revisão bibliográfica da epistemologia geográfica amparada por uma discussão mais ampla de geopolítica. Com isso, criamos uma proposição de prática pedagógica para trabalhar o conflito em questão objetivando o reconhecimento dos efeitos da guerra no dia a dia dos educandos sob a ótica do materialismo histórico-dialético.

Palavras-chave: geografia escolar; geopolítica; guerra; epistemologia.

Rusia vs. Ucrania: La geopolítica en el ámbito de la geografía escolar a través de la lente de la totalidad.

RESUMEN:

Considerando el desarrollo de la epistemología de la ciencia geográfica, es crucial reconocer que ninguna realidad local puede explicarse por sí sola. En la actual etapa de internacionalización del capitalismo, la geografía utiliza el concepto de formación socioespacial para comprender cómo los lugares se configuran históricamente a partir de relaciones a escala global, impulsadas por la economía y la geopolítica global. De esta manera, la geografía tiene la categoría de totalidad, ampliamente trabajada por Milton Santos, para comprender cómo se afecta el lugar a escalas más amplias, ya sea a nivel regional o global. El objetivo de este artículo es desarrollar una propuesta teórico-metodológica para el componente curricular de geografía basada en la categoría de totalidad, apuntando a comprender el conflicto entre Rusia y Ucrania como contenido escolar. Para esta propuesta utilizamos como método una revisión bibliográfica de epistemología geográfica sustentada en una discusión más amplia de geopolítica. Con esto, creamos una propuesta de práctica pedagógica para trabajar el conflicto en cuestión, teniendo como objetivo reconocer los efectos de la guerra en la vida cotidiana de los estudiantes desde la perspectiva del materialismo histórico dialéctico.

Palabras clave: geografía escolar; geopolítica; guerra; epistemología.

Introduction

One of the primary objectives of school education is to cultivate students' awareness of their nationality, critically shaping their understanding of national symbols and the foundational notions of a supposed national identity[1]. The very establishment of geography as a modern science was a response to the ideological demands of consolidating nation-states under the capitalist mode of production, aiming at the unification of national territories—an issue extensively examined in Lacoste's (2012) historical critique, which played a pivotal role in reshaping geographical epistemology. More recently, Pereira (1999) revisited this theme through a detailed study on the genesis of the geography taught in classrooms[2].

Given the theoretical and methodological trajectory of geographical science, the starting point for understanding the contradictions of global space is the recognition that no country can be explained in isolation. To unravel the spatial organization of each locality, geography relies on the fundamental category of socio-spatial formation, which underscores the idea that places are continually shaped by their integration into a broader totality—one that encompasses global economic and political structures. The contemporary stage of capitalism has driven the internationalization of economic flows to such an extent that national economies are deeply embedded in extensive and intricate transnational production chains[3].

Acknowledging global totality means recognizing that today's space is inherently global. However, the progressive expansion of capitalism since the mid-16th century, which has led to the integration of regional and local markets, has not resulted in a homogenization of place-specific characteristics. In this context, nation-states, as Santos (2012) emphasizes, remain a central concept in the geographical analysis of global spatial dynamics. The proliferation of states has become a functional necessity for institutionalizing capitalism's contradictions on a worldwide scale. Consequently, discussions on contemporary geopolitical developments must necessarily begin with these national actors, as they mediate both material and immaterial flows from external sources within their internal dynamics.

What is understood as "geopolitics" is the contemporary state of global political and economic power relations—that is, the organization of the international division of labor. Since the 19th century, geopolitics have been invoked both to describe the prevailing state of trade relations

1 The concept of "national identity" emerges as a product of state formation within the capitalist mode of production. Historically, the sovereign government actively promotes a national culture and a shared sense of identity, primarily through establishing an official language, curated cultural practices, and a collective sense of identity.

2 As Oliveira (1988, p. 68) points out: "The concept of 'national identity' emerges as a product of the formation of states under the capitalist mode of production. Historically, the actions of sovereign governments actively promoted a national culture and shared sense of identity, principally through the establishment of an official language, the curation of a national culture, and the construction of a shared identity. This process was particularly relevant during the 18th and 19th centuries, in a Europe where the challenges arising from the development of the capitalist mode of production confronted nation-states with the issue of capital's stateless space".

3 Under imperialism—whose historical evolution was thoroughly described by Lenin (2021)—the contradictory relationship reaches a new stage. The development of the capitalist mode of production during the 20th century has added such complexity to the international division of labor that all markets (local, regional, and global) have become interconnected and are recognized by the label of "globalization".

and to explain political conflicts between nations, often infused with the ideological justification for territorial expansion by imperialist powers. Geopolitics as a concept was conceived as an instrument of power and domination, aiming to outline the economic and military conditions through which a given state might assert itself as a global power (Vesentini, 2000).

Thus, this study argues that the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has ramifications that extend far beyond their respective territories. However, our goal is not to dissect the intricate determinants of this conflict or its broader implications for the global geopolitical landscape. Rather, we aim to propose a theoretical-methodological framework for incorporating this event into the teaching of school geography.

To achieve this objective, we draw upon the geographical category of totality: the contradictions of space and its conflicts can only be fully understood through a perspective that considers places not only at their immediate scale but also within a global scope, establishing a coherent and logical unity among them. In other words, space as it exists today is the historical synthesis of functions and forms that have been continuously created and restructured over time. As such, the autonomy of regions and places is entirely functional to the spatial totality[4].

Analyzing spatial dynamics through the lens of totality challenges the simplistic and restrictive perception of geography as merely a "discipline of locations" (Santos, 2006). For educators, merely pinpointing the Russia-Ukraine conflict on a world map is insufficient—nor should this process be regarded as distant or disconnected from students' local realities. As Milton Santos suggests, when considering geographical space as synonymous with "used territory", we must emphasize the historical relationship between society and its environment, recognizing that human production always takes place on a material basis inherited from the past[5]. In this sense, we seek to develop a methodological approach that contextualizes this conflict by examining the historical formation of both nations and its significance for the configuration of contemporary geopolitics.

From the Particular to the Universal: Totality as a methodological approach to understanding the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Our starting premise is that the geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine can only be fully grasped when understood as a historical process, shaped by economic, military, and political determinants and spatialized within a specific geographical context. This makes it particularly relevant for basic education, especially given the war's contemporary significance and its implications for global spatial organization. Like any historical process involving nation-states, this conflict unfolds within an international system structured around core-periphery relations.

4 According to Milton Santos (2002; 2006; 2012), space must be regarded as a totality, analogous to the society itself, which imbues it with life. Thus, space constitutes a set of functions and forms emerging from processes of both past and present, whose representative forms of social relations manifest themselves through functions and processes.

5 As Santos (2006) argues, "a perspective based on used territory leads to the idea of banal space, the space of everyone. It is the space of all men, no matter their differences; the space of all institutions, no matter their strength; the space of all enterprises, no matter their power. This is the space of all the dimensions of happening, of all the determinations of the social totality." (p. 1).

As Milton Santos (2012) emphasizes, nation-states constitute "a smaller totality within a broader totality, the world-space" (p. 27). They function as agents of processes and flows, both internally and externally. By examining their historical interactions, we can trace how these agents relate to different regions of the world. What takes precedence in such analysis are mechanisms—historical processes—that define interregional interactions, as only these processes explain contemporary realities. In this sense, processes are ongoing systems driven by human actions and economic activities within a given spatial framework (Santos, 2009).

The global geopolitical order consists of a multiplicity of nation-states, each exercising sovereignty according to principles established by international law. This sovereignty is rooted in a cohesive population, well-defined territorial borders, a centralized government with the prerogative of self-determination, and the capacity to engage diplomatically with other nations. However, this national dynamism is permanently intertwined with shifts in the international division of labor, generating complex economic and commercial interdependencies.

The internal dynamics of each nation-state can lead to cooperation or conflict with other sovereign entities. Each nation develops distinct economic and commercial activities based on specific socio-spatial formations. Crucially, the process of national and cultural identity formation is often reinforced through the deliberate differentiation from regional counterparts. What distinguishes one "people" from another is largely an ideological and aesthetic abstraction, whose origins lie in the economic, cultural, and political foundations of states and their respective governments.

Thus, it is idealistic to claim that the consolidation of capitalism occurred without class conflict—a fallacy easily refuted when one examines modern history. As Losurdo (2012) critiques, the post-World War II period is often portrayed in mainstream historiography as a "long era of peace and stability" within the international system. However, this apparent pacification only applied to the ruling classes within the European and American welfare states. In contrast, it was a period marked by violent struggles for decolonization in Africa, racial oppression in the United States, and brutal repression under Latin American dictatorships in the second half of the 20th century, among other instances. In fact, asymmetrical wars—where the oppressor dominate the oppressed—define the historical rhythm of capitalist development.

As Ramonet (1998) observed, the current geopolitical landscape—shaped by the productive and financial internationalization of capitalism—resembles a state of "great chaos": regional economic blocs proliferate, nationalisms resurge, states fragment, and minority groups increasingly demand independence. Once again, we emphasize that the world-space cannot be analyzed in terms of a simplistic "before and after" dichotomy, as conflicts and acts of war merely express the ultimate consequences of national interests clashing on the global stage. Recognizing the inherent instability of the international system serves as a fundamental pedagogical entry point for understanding the Russia-Ukraine war.

Thus, our inquiry focuses on how to approach this subject matter within the theoretical-methodological framework of geography, while adhering to the three key legal and curricular guidelines that structure Brazilian education: 1) the Law of Guidelines and Bases for Education (LDB/1996), which establishes the foundations of the national education system; 2) the Common

National Curriculum Base (BNCC) (Brazil, 2018), which[6] defines competencies and skills for all educational levels; 3) State and municipal curricula, which adapt national directives to local[7] and regional specificities[8]. Each of these documents delineates the roles and responsibilities of different educational actors within Brazil's federative system. For educators, these frameworks guide pedagogical practices within school communities.

Broadly speaking, the BNCC expands upon the LDB/1996 by detailing content, skills, and competencies, in accordance with Article 26 of the LDB, which mandates a common national curriculum while allowing for local adaptations to reflect regional cultural, social, and economic particularities. This approach aims to provide students with a foundational education that reconciles national citizenship with the uniqueness of local places. The responsibility for curriculum design and pedagogical approaches at the state and municipal levels falls to respective local authorities.

From a historical perspective, Brazilian educational legislation—consolidated in the LDB/1996—reflects a broader national debate among educational institutions, civil society, and local communities regarding the structural deficiencies of the country's curriculum considering the profound political and economic transformations of the late 20th century. The LDB's primary goal was to institutionalize the struggles of educators, who, since the 1980s, had resisted and sought to dismantle the authoritarian educational practices of the military dictatorship[9].

This new LDB also set out to correct historical regional asymmetries within Brazil's educational system, aiming to ensure equal educational opportunities regardless of geographic origin. Amid these sweeping legislative changes, Brazilian geography as a discipline also underwent an epistemological shift, transitioning towards a critical perspective that sought to renew the theoretical and methodological foundations of geographic education.

As Moraes and Costa (1988) noted, by the late 1980s, geographic thought faced a deep crisis, largely due to its inability to address the practical and theoretical challenges posed by contemporary societies. This led to a critique of "traditional geography", a term that came to encompass theories and methodologies that failed to account for spatial dynamics and the

6 The 1996 Law of Guidelines and Bases for Education (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases para a Educação—LDB) defines and regulates the structure of Brazil's educational system in accordance with constitutional principles.

7 The Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC, or National Common Curricular Base) comprises a set of guidelines serving as a state policy designed to nationally standardize the educational objectives that students are expected to achieve. The BNCC establishes competencies and skills that must be attained within each curricular component—that is, the academic subjects.

8 It is important to emphasize that the states, the Federal District, and municipalities have autonomy to organize their respective educational systems, as prescribed by the LDB/1996. According to Article 8 of the LDB, although states and municipalities have autonomy in organizing their educational systems, they must do so in close collaboration with the federal government, adhering to national educational policies and guidelines (Brasil, 1996).

9 At the same time, LDB/1996 addresses a historical context characterized by the necessity of establishing a unified national educational standard. Before this law, individual states had considerable autonomy in determining their curricula. In turn, the Ministry of Education adopted centralized educational policies, aiming to establish a common foundation for quality education throughout the Brazilian territory. Consequently, the states of the federation began to follow the theoretical-methodological guidelines set by the central government—thus shifting from their previous autonomy, as they sought to standardize educational content nationwide, as opposed to the previous approach, where states had autonomy to independently structure their curricula.

contradictions inherent to geographical space. In school curricula, this traditional geography had crystallized in the public imagination as a discipline focused on simplistic descriptions of places, particularly their physical characteristics, without deeper analytical engagement[10].

Santos' (2006) epistemological critique of fragmented conceptions of geographical space exposes a fundamental issue: geography is often treated as political space, economic space, anthropological space, or even touristic space. This segmentation does a disservice to the discipline, as it deviates from its original condition of totality, preventing geography from fulfilling its role as a science capable of explaining the world in its complexity. Since socio-spatial dynamics are historically produced, any robust analysis must acknowledge that this process is structured through multiple, interconnected, and indivisible determinants. Attempting to explain place through place itself is epistemologically weak and undermines geography's theoretical-methodological framework.

As Almeida (2015) notes, textbook geography often presents a descriptive analysis that prioritizes the "immediate, lived space" before engaging with more distant realities. This approach portrays geographical space as a fragmented reality, detached from broader totalities and devoid of connections to the social processes in which students are embedded. According to Almeida, "both nature and society are presented as mere occupants of an inherited space, whose organization was predetermined by external forces beyond its current dynamics" (p. 2). In other words, this conservative geography deliberately removes from the classroom any discussions on how space is produced, transformed, and occupied through social and political processes, thereby concealing the inherently social nature of geographical space itself.

What role should geography play in education? We argue that the school curriculum must be critical and reflective, equipping students with the cognitive tools to discern the power relations shaping their lived spaces. Geography, as a discipline, possesses a theoretical-methodological foundation that enables students to draw connections across local, regional, and global scales. Given that the formation of critically engaged citizens is a central objective of the Law of Guidelines and Bases for Education (LDB), the National Curriculum Guidelines, and the Common National Curriculum Base (BNCC), it becomes clear that learning is neither a universal nor a homogeneous process. Instead, it unfolds through the specific material and geographical conditions experienced by each student.

The deliberate suppression of economic and political discussions from the curriculum during Brazil's military dictatorship was an ideological choice aimed at shaping a depoliticized educational framework. The post-dictatorship reform of the LDB sought to rectify these omissions, not only in geography but across all social sciences. By reintroducing discussions on socio-spatial formation, the curriculum now acknowledges that local processes are deeply entangled with international relations—in other words, geopolitics.

From the early years of elementary education, geographical content is introduced through fundamental concepts and categories such as place, lived space, urban and rural environments, and region. This progressive approach, often described as the "concentric circles" method, mediates

10 The historical contextualization of the diverse currents of geographical thought that clashed within the discipline's unity is thoroughly elaborated by Santos' incisive critique (2002).

students' immediate reality with broader geographical themes. It serves as the cognitive foundation for developing spatial thinking, progressing from concrete experiences to more abstract geographical reasoning. As Kimura (2008) emphasizes, students initially grasp geographical concepts through their immediate surroundings, gradually developing greater abstraction capabilities as they engage with more distant and complex spatial realities[11]. This method is justified by its student-centered approach, positioning learners as active agents of knowledge construction.

This pedagogical directive aligns with the LDB and BNCC's fundamental principles, ensuring that learning occurs through an ongoing dialogue between formal knowledge and students' lived experiences. By bridging everyday knowledge with academic content, this dialogical relationship fosters a methodology where students understand that geographical concepts are not abstract, disconnected notions, but directly relate to their lives and the broader societal structures in which they exist.

Not coincidentally, in the early years of schooling, pedagogical approaches are primarily structured around the concepts of place and lived space: students engage with their home, school, neighborhood, and local community, illustrating that the contradictions of geographical space are not confined to textbooks but are embedded in their daily lives. As children learn geography, they simultaneously engage in spatial literacy—the ability to read and interpret places. Even before they learn to read words, children are already deciphering the world through their lived space, gradually constructing the meanings of their immediate environment through their senses.

In Basic Education, this process culminates in the third year of high school, a stage at which students are expected to have developed the cognitive skills necessary to grasp much broader geographical scales, including global space. In other words, a student's perception of the world is deeply shaped by their lived experiences, interactions, and emotional connections. The concentric circles methodology, therefore, is not an arbitrary curricular choice; rather, it is a pedagogical strategy that reinforces the idea that the school environment is just one of the many arenas in which citizenship is exercised.

This discussion is crucial in understanding that geography's curricular content is not randomly distributed. On the contrary, it follows a meticulously planned and continuous learning trajectory that extends across all years of Basic Education. This structure rejects a compartmentalized, stage-based model of teaching, recognizing that the mediation of content between teachers and students must remain intrinsically linked to their lived experiences. Learning must necessarily build upon previously covered material, enabling students to continuously refine their understanding of geographical space by integrating social, cultural, economic, and political aspects.

According to the BNCC (Brasil, 2018), geopolitical content is explicitly introduced at the high school level, primarily within the humanities and social sciences curriculum, encompassing geography, philosophy, history, and sociology. The BNCC's theoretical-methodological guidelines acknowledge that, at this stage, students must move beyond the mere representation of space through maps, requiring a historical and cultural interpretation of spatial processes. Space must

11 "In the early grades, studies begin with the community, then the neighborhood, subsequently the municipality, and finally the state. In the second stage of primary education (...), the Brazilian territory becomes the primary spatial focus (Brazil as a whole and its regions)." (Santos, 2002, p. 101).

be understood as a complex interplay of objects, societies, and historical processes— a locus shaped by movements of various social groups, encompassing disputes, conflicts, occupations, and territorial dominations.

The BNCC's pedagogical approach to geography is based on the recognition that spatial transformations occur through social relations, which are inherently political and embedded within a specific mode of production. To introduce the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a geographical topic, we might begin with a guiding question: Who are the key agents directly involved in this process?

This inquiry directs our focus toward the role of human agency in shaping space. From its very origins, what distinguishes human societies from other species is their dialectical ability to shape their environment while being shaped by it. Technology serves as the mediator of this relationship, reflecting different stages of humanity's technological and social development. The interaction between society and nature is thus fundamentally mediated by labor, aligning with the theoretical-methodological foundations of historical materialism, which seeks to overcome the artificial separation between nature and society, as proposed by Quaini (1979)[12].

Today, it is evident that the Russia-Ukraine war extends beyond the direct involvement of Russian and Ukrainian societies. Numerous external processes and actors influence the conflict, including the United States and its geopolitical allies, as well as multilateral international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Facing such a multiplicity of agents, a methodological approach rooted in Santos' (2006) concept of "used territory" as totality provides a critical framework:

> Used territory, viewed as a totality, serves as a privileged analytical field, as it simultaneously reveals both the global structure of society and the complex nature of its spatial use. For hegemonic actors, used territory functions as a resource, securing their private interests. Consequently, their actions continuously reshape their use, incorporating material structures that facilitate exogenous activities. Conversely, for the dominated actors, territory is an abode— a space of adaptation to the local geographical conditions, where they also devise strategies to sustain their survival in place. (Santos, 2006, p. 10).

First and foremost, it is essential to recognize that geopolitical conflicts arise from social relations involving distinct territories within a given international conjuncture—in this case, culminating in the deployment of Russian troops into Ukrainian territory in February 2022. To

12 "Although Marx recognizes the primacy of external nature, he quickly emphasizes that this distinction between a pre-social nature and a socially conceived nature is meaningful only insofar as human beings are considered distinct from nature, and that this nature preceding human history no longer exists anywhere today. (…) In short, Marx is not interested in nature as a philosophical, ontological, and therefore abstract and metaphysical problem, but solely within the framework of so-called universal history." (Quaini, 1979, p. 44).

properly contextualize the Russia-Ukraine war, it is crucial to emphasize that this 21st-century conflict has deep historical roots, shaped by long-standing geopolitical tensions. One key event exemplifying this ongoing friction was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014[13].

Accordingly, geography education must equip students with analytical tools to recognize that geographical space is always the product of historical processes.

Beyond that, students must grasp that these processes—perpetually in motion—are driven by the material necessities inherent to specific modes of production and their social relations. While spatial location serves as geography's starting point, it is equally important to understand that social and productive relations are geographically situated and have tangible repercussions on places and populations. This is totality in action: as Santos (2006) asserts, "totalizing approaches tend to seek some correspondence with the unity of the real world" (p. 4). In this sense, the Russia-Ukraine war has generated worldwide repercussions, whether through the diplomatic condemnation of Russia by numerous nation-states, the deterioration of international relations, or the disruption of global supply chains dependent on regional industries.

Ukraine's immediate response to the invasion came through President Volodymyr Zelensky's announcement in February 2022 of a complete severance of diplomatic ties with Moscow. A month later, the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned Russia's actions, prompting a wave of economic sanctions imposed by the European Union, the United States, Australia, and Japan. Since then, Russia has been subjected to severe economic and trade restrictions, further isolating it from Western markets. More recently, the Kremlin has hinted at the possibility of downgrading diplomatic relations with the West, citing increased U.S. and NATO involvement in the war, although no formal decision has been made (Reuters, 2024; Sanches, 2022; UOL, 2022).

Considering this, it becomes evident that actions undertaken by specific political agents in localized territories—such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine—produce far-reaching social and political repercussions that shape geopolitics. However, this totality is not static; rather, it is a dynamic historical process, as national structures continuously evolve over time. Santos (2012) underscores this point, asserting that places can only be understood in relation to the broader whole, as they are geographic assemblages of social variables that "change in role and value as history unfolds" (p. 57).

Adopting a totality-based approach to world geography offers educators a powerful pedagogical tool: even distant geopolitical events can be connected to students' everyday lives. A straightforward example is the rise in fuel and food prices, a consequence of maritime trade disruptions caused by vessels rerouting to avoid military conflict zones. Another clear repercussion

13 Historically, Crimea was inhabited by numerous peoples, including the Cimmerians, Romans, Huns, and Ottomans. In the 18th century, following a military victory over the Turks, the region was incorporated into the Russian Empire under the command of Empress Catherine the Great. In the 20th century, Communist leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine as a symbolic gesture during the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's annexation to the Russian Empire. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 created a geopolitical limbo, as most countries have not recognized this annexation, leaving the region as a central focal point of international tensions (Hopf, 2016).

is the arrival of Ukrainian and Russian immigrants in Brazil, fleeing direct violence in the war. And this is just within Brazil's national territory—expanding our scale of analysis further reveals even broader ramifications[14].

As Lim *et al*. (2022) observe, individuals from both Russia and Ukraine have sought asylum in neighboring countries such as Hungary, Moldova, Poland, and Romania. These nations—along with more distant states like Mexico and the United States— have established humanitarian corridors and issued work permits for war refugees, ensuring both their survival and their ability to contribute to local economies.

The interdependence of place and totality also becomes evident when considering that no nation is entirely self-sufficient, every country plays a role in the global economy. Some, however, occupy particularly strategic positions in commodity production: for instance, Ukraine is one of the world's largest exporters of wheat and sunflower oil, while Russia is a dominant producer of oil and natural gas. The conflict between these nations illustrates how war not only generates geopolitical instability but also disrupts economic flows worldwide. Supply chain interruptions, sanctions, and production declines result in scarcity and inflation of essential goods—as seen in the rising prices of wheat and crude oil. Thus, the war's consequences extend well beyond the battlefield, affecting global markets through shortages and price volatility (AP, 2022).

One fundamental question emerges: what is the spatial function of war in the organization of a given territory? Identifying the economic and political agents involved helps uncover the interests driving the conflict. While it is impossible to fully grasp the intricate complexity of material reality, given its historical multiplicity of determinants, historical materialist dialectics enable us to trace the origins of these processes and construct a theoretical framework for understanding them. Human actions are never isolated from societal motivations and interests— instead, they are deeply embedded within a larger totality: the global spatial order. Individual free will is always conditioned by the prevailing social relations.

According to the BNCC (Brazil, 2018), teaching geopolitical issues in geography education should revolve around two key concepts: territory and borders. As the document outlines, territory is defined by a set of properties such as power, jurisdiction, administration, and sovereignty, often—but not necessarily—linked to a national government. Meanwhile, borders must be explored through their historical significance, acknowledging that as cultures materialize, communities not only establish physical boundaries but also develop social structures and define spheres of interaction with other collective entities.

At the high school level, these operational concepts help students analyze spatial dynamics, particularly in relation to the formation of national and regional identities shaped by territorial associations and border delineations. Regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, students—aligned with the broader research competencies outlined in the curriculum— should investigate the role of these territories within the global totality, tracing the origins of the conflict and its ongoing

14 As defined by Santos (2012): "The facts are all there, objective and independent of us. However, it is up to us to transform them into historical facts by identifying the relationships that define them, either by observing their cause-and-effect relationships—that is, their history—or by recognizing the order in which they organize themselves into a system. (…) It is through their historical existence, thus defined within a social structure, that we recognize both the categories of reality and the categories of analysis. Thus, we will no longer run the risk of confusing the present with what it no longer is" (p. 15).

evolution. A chronological timeline could serve as practical exercise: what were the key events leading up to the war? How has the conflict unfolded over time? Such an approach would allow students to map the interconnections between this geopolitical process and other nation-states, as well as multilateral organizations.

As previously mentioned, we aim not to dissect the precise determinants that led to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that there is no simple or definitive answer, as tensions between these nations date back as early as the 6th century AD when Slavic peoples migrated eastward into what is now Eastern Europe. This historical process entailed a gradual superposition of various peoples and cultures over the territories we now recognize as Russia and Ukraine, shaping their national identities over time.

This historical backdrop underscores the inherently historical nature of geographic space. What we understand as "nation" or "territory" is, in essence, the political consolidation of specific social groups at the expense of others. As Santos (2012) argues, the present reality of space is shaped by historical moments that have crystallized into geographic objects, which remain integral to contemporary social life. It is argued that Russia today claims a certain portion of Ukrainian territory as being genuinely Russian (in the sense of language, culture, and ethnicity) and Ukraine, in turn, wants to maintain its political autonomy to safeguard its political borders. Meanwhile, Ukraine seeks to maintain political autonomy by preserving its territorial sovereignty. At the same time, external geopolitical forces further complicate the conflict, particularly NATO's strategic involvement in the region.

From an analytical perspective, territorial occupation is neither inherently "good" nor "bad" in moral terms; rather, it is a historical process of spatial development shaped by distinct peoples and cultures within the broader formation of nation-states under capitalist production. In other words, the territorial and border disputes underlying the Russia-Ukraine conflict reflect the very historicity of these regions. Geography, by recognizing that none of its concepts are static, emphasizes that spatial dynamics derive their meaning from the social and political actions of Russian and Ukrainian societies.

In the context of geography education, it is essential to approach this conflict through a dynamic lens, illustrating to students that geopolitical phenomena must always be understood within their historical context. If a teacher presents Russia as a purely malevolent actor and Ukraine as a mere victim (or vice versa), they risk promoting a static and oversimplified geographical perspective that disregards the fluidity of territorial formations. More critically, this approach would obscure the historical processes that have shaped both nations. As Losurdo (2012) reminds us, within historical materialism, exploitation, and oppression are not merely attributable to individuals or groups but are embedded in objective social relations that cannot be separated from the totality of historical development.

Ultimately, one of the core objectives of Brazil's national curriculum is to foster ethical education for citizenship, grounded in values of diversity, inclusion, and democracy. Thus, educators must reflect on a fundamental question: What kind of education do we aspire to provide for present and future generations? Are we merely shaping a labor force detached from reality, or are we cultivating young individuals and adults who are conscious of their lived space and their fundamental rights within society?

A geography teacher who fails to connect classroom content to students' lived experiences neglects the essential bridge between theory and practice. Given that geography inherently examines space through different spatial frameworks—places, regions, communities, depending on the intended scale of analysis—it follows that local events are always linked to broader global processes. Thus arises the need for a continuous dialectical movement—a perpetual oscillation between scales—that illustrates how the proximate mirrors the distant, and vice versa, with each dimension mutually illuminating and elucidating the other.

If this connection is not made, how can students grasp that their actions at a local level have tangible repercussions across broader spatial scales? Would this not contradict the very mission of "educating for citizenship" by failing to highlight how individual and collective actions contribute to Brazil's broader development? While a geopolitical conflict in the form of war may seem distant from our immediate reality—fortunately so—it remains the school's role to foster awareness among students of the often-brutal realities that shape the world. If we neglect this duty, we risk denying the school community a fundamental right: the ability to recognize reality. And as history has shown, if we fail to critically engage with our past, we are doomed to repeat it.

Concluding Remarks

The configuration of geographic space reflects a complex division of labor, shaped by multiple determinants whose origins are located across different scales—from the local to the international dimensions argued by Milton Santos (2002; 2006; 2012). In this article, we have adopted the global totality as a fundamental category for geographic education in schools, aiming to distance ourselves from a static, purely empirical geography that is impoverished concerning its theoretical and methodological potential. Enabling a comprehensive interpretation of the world—geography's principal curricular objective—means demonstrating that this world is neither linear nor homogeneous. Rather, it requires constant affirmation that places are complex, necessarily imbued with history and meaning, because human beings, as incredibly diverse, multifaceted, and contradictory agents, are those who produce them.

We have sought to present a theoretical and methodological proposal to address the conflict between Russia and Ukraine through the insights of geographical science. Recognizing that the principal premise underlying the category of totality is the permanent presence of relations between places and broader territorial scales—such as the region, the nation-state, and even the global spatial organization, we opted to employ dialectical historical materialism as the guiding framework for this analysis. This implies interpreting the current war as a historical process; that is, the immediate reality does not explain itself, but rather is the long and complex process driven by multiple social, political, and cultural determinants.

Keeping in sight the curriculum documents guiding pedagogical practices in Brazilian schools (LDB, BNCC, and state/municipal curricula), we mediated these methodological guidelines with the theoretical-methodological proposal of totality. As mentioned throughout this article, the geography teacher's primary task is to demonstrate through practice that students' local reality is connected to broader societal and global contexts. If there is a geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine, what impact does this event have on the daily life of a Brazilian? One could

cite several ordinary examples: gasoline, natural gas, cooking oil, fertilizers used in Brazilian agriculture, and daily bread—all these were directly affected by this distant conflict, given the inputs produced in these territories. This represents totality in action, insofar as Brazil is directly related to the countries involved in the conflict (especially when considering commercial relations).

It is important to emphasize that these aspects, reflected in students' immediate realities, can serve as a starting point; this initial "contact" aligns with the concentric-circle method discussed in the article, moving from the concrete toward the abstract. By demonstrating that a distant geopolitical event affects everyday life in Brazil, we illustrate totality in practice. Thus, to approach totality itself, we propose a scientific investigation of this historical process: that is, identifying the conflict's origins and organizing a "timeline" that presents war events linearly, thereby establishing coherence within an apparently random set of facts.

Methodologically, given the recency of this conflict, teachers may propose a comprehensive investigation of the war through its media representation in Brazil. Utilizing excerpts from newspapers, magazines, news broadcasts, and similar media sources addressing the war between Russia and Ukraine, teachers can critically deconstruct these materials, if necessary, while clearly delineating their principal agents—be they the governments of Russia or Ukraine, multilateral organizations such as the UN and NATO, the Brazilian government, among others.

Thus, the geopolitical conflict is identified as an ongoing process, endowed with a past and a present, whose dynamics are primarily shaped by the political and economic interests of the involved actors. By employing geographic concepts and categories, we can illuminate the contradictory nature inherent to global spatial organization: if Russia has invaded Ukraine, does this not constitute a violation of the borders between both territories? Such a question already provides an opportunity to examine the historical and relative meaning of the concept of borders, as Russia itself claims parts of Ukrainian territory as its own.

According to BNCC guidelines, contextualizing and recognizing contradictions within the analyzed space means highlighting the ongoing relationship between global centers and peripheries, whose complementarity reveals the economic, social, and political inequalities of places. Methodologically, geography analyzes the formation of territories and borders across different times and spaces, recognizing that power relations determine territorial occupation and guide the geopolitical roles of nation-states.

Finally, beyond mere market economic aspects, it is a teacher's duty to sensitize students to the relations of oppression and violence occurring in society, regardless of geographic location. Once again, we understand the school as one of the primary vehicles for constructing citizenship and democratic principles of coexistence among diverse groups. Therefore, totality constitutes an effective category for comprehending individual phenomena, recognizing that the part cannot be disconnected from the whole; dialectics, in turn, provides the method for reconstructing the genesis of the analyzed process through reciprocally relating the global to the local. In other words, context—rather than simple cause-and-effect relationships—guides our reconstruction of geographic phenomena. Time and space are not isolated categories; hence the necessity of investigating an object from the perspective of historical process.

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