

To help win peace, anti-war activists should support military aid for Ukraine

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Eight months after Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine, the realities and aims of his brutal war of aggression are evident for all to see: Tens of thousands of civilian deaths, mass graves, widespread torture and rape, the forced transfer of children to Russia and the establishment of brutal Russian-controlled administrations in occupied areas carrying out dictatorial repression and policies of forced assimilation.

Moreover, Putin's latest tactic is to make life unbearable for Ukrainians by attacking residential areas and destroying the country's energy infrastructure just as winter approaches.

These crimes differ very little from those we have seen committed by United States and Australian governments throughout history, such as in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Much as with those wars, Russia's aim is the complete [destruction of Ukraine as an independent nation](#).

In response, the Ukrainian people have waged a heroic struggle of self-defence, with hundreds of thousands of citizens – including trade unionists, socialists, anarchists and environmentalists, among others – volunteering and dying for the cause.

Having successfully defeated Putin's initial push to take over the capital, Kyiv, and install a puppet regime, the Ukrainian people are today engaging in an important counteroffensive to win back territory from the invading forces.

Just as peace activists stood in solidarity with the people of Vietnam and Iraq against US-Australian wars of aggression, so too should they stand with the Ukrainian peoples' just struggle for self-determination. They should also stand with those in Russia, like Feminist Anti-War Resistance, who heroically resist Putin's war of aggression and its [accompanying destruction of democratic rights at home](#).

It is certainly true that there has been decades of alternating hostility and [cosy relations](#) between Australia's NATO allies and Russia. Moreover, as with all wars, imperialist governments like the US and its NATO partners are seeking to take advantage of Putin's war to pursue their own interests, boosting "defence" spending and inculcating hatred and fear of others among their citizens.

However, unlike its wars in Vietnam and Iraq, minor imperialist power Australia is not party to a war of aggression in Ukraine. It is also the case that every single NATO country, as well as Australia, has stated their opposition to sending troops to fight in this war

Oppose military trainers?

It is within this context that Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced on October 12 that his government was considering [providing military training to Ukrainian forces outside Ukraine](#).

It poses the question: how should peace activists respond to this announcement?

One response has been offered by Australians for War Powers Reform (AWPR) President Alison Broinowski, in an article first published on [Pearls and Irritations](#) under the headline “Ukraine military instructors decision echoes the lead up to Australia’s deployment in Vietnam”, and later republished in [Green Left](#).

Broinowski’s article provides important information regarding the war powers inquiry initiated by the Albanese government, and AWPR had done valuable campaigning on this issue, pointing out that the decision to go to war is too important to be left to a handful of ministers.

Public consultation and parliamentary debate on military issues should be the norm, as Broinowski advocated.

However, on the specific question of whether peace activists should support Albanese’s suggestion to offer trainers to Ukraine, Broinowski says no. She argues such a move would echo “the dispatch of a training team that preceded Australia’s full-scale deployment in Vietnam and the ‘humanitarian missions’ before the RAAF went into Iraq...”

These comments follow comments quoted in a [previous GL article](#), where Broinowski is quoted saying sending advisors or trainers would lead to “more direct involvement” and “represent a major escalation in Australia’s involvement in the conflict” that went “well beyond the existing program of providing equipment and funds”.

She said: “The last thing we need is to be slowly drawn into another overseas war that does not directly affect Australia,” adding that “while many in the community believe that supporting Ukraine against the illegal invasion by Russia is justified, there appears to be almost nothing being done toward negotiations and a ceasefire”.

Reality of Albanese’s announcement

There are numerous problems with these statements. Let’s start with the facts.

Broinowski argues that sending military trainers represents a “major escalation” but, beyond vague references to Vietnam and Iraq, provides no substantiating evidence or explanation for why this should be the case.

Why is sending Bushmasters, as part of the existing program of providing equipment OK, as Broinowski suggests, but training Ukrainians on how to use them a “major escalation” that should be opposed? Broinowski gives no answer to this obvious question.

Yet, if anything, Albanese’s announcement indicates the opposite: he is seeking to use this proposal of trainers to cover up for a scaling back of Australia’s support for Ukraine.

Ukraine’s ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, said just that, [stating](#): “I haven’t seen a request from the Ukrainian government to assist with training ... What we should be discussing is artillery, ammunition, Bushmasters, Hawkeis [both armoured vehicles], heavy weapons, drones.”

Despite Albanese’s claims that Australia is the largest non-NATO contributor to Ukraine, [this is not the case](#). By flagging such a proposal that would be of little actual cost to Australia, Albanese hopes to look like a friend of Ukraine while ignoring their urgent and legitimate requests for the equipment and funds they need to repel Putin’s occupation.

Peace activists should be demanding Albanese listen to the just requests of the Ukrainian people and government. They should also make clear that such support does not require an increase in military expenditure and should come from the existing military budget and supplies.

Much less does it require acceptance of Australian “defence” policy, including nuclear submarines, AUKUS, ANZUS, the Quad and anti-China war hysteria.

Precedents

But what if Ukraine did want military trainers? Broinowski’s claims this would slowly draw Australia into the war, using Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan as examples.

The problem here is twofold. First, Australia was not “slowly drawn” into those wars: it deliberately chose to participate in the invasion of those countries to further its and the US’s imperialist interests.

In contrast, while making a lot of noise about fighting Russian aggression, Albanese and his government are more interested in using Ukraine as cover for potential military engagement with the rising power in the region, China.

Second, Australia’s involvement in Ukraine is nothing like its involvement in Vietnam or Iraq. There Australia was the aggressor; in Ukraine it is providing some support to the victim, even if this is largely motivated by its own interests and not those of Ukrainian people.

The same is true, for example, of the [US training of Rojava’s revolutionary pro-Kurdish military forces](#), which was undoubtedly motivated by Washington’s interest in defeating Islamic State. Yet, peace activists were correct not to oppose such training nor US military action that helped the Kurds.

Closer to home, we have had the example of East Timor, where peace activists not only did not oppose, but [campaigned to send United Nations/Australian peacekeeping troops](#) to halt the carnage being unleashed by Indonesian forces.

Of course, activists knew at the time that Australia would subsequently use this to seek leverage over East Timor, but was it then wrong to support the troop deployment?

Peace through solidarity

Opposing Putin’s war in Ukraine and demanding Australia provide military aid to Ukraine is of critical importance to the peace movement. It is not promoting war but helping bring about the only just peace possible — the expulsion of Putin’s invading forces from Ukrainian territory.

With Vietnam, it was the ability of the peace movement at home to link up with those resisting in Vietnam that led to the defeat of the US-Australia war of aggression.

That defeat not only inspired other anti-colonial struggles across the world but was central to what became known as the “Vietnam syndrome” — a generalised sentiment of public opposition to wars of aggression.

If there are echoes to be found with Vietnam in Ukraine today, it is here: the need for peace activists to link up with and materially support forces in Ukraine and Russia resisting Putin’s war so as to ensure a withdrawal of Russian troops.

The alternative proposed by Broinowski, that of prioritising negotiations, will not by itself bring about a just peace, in Ukraine or anywhere else, any quicker. That is plain to see in the military assaults that have been waged in the shadow of Putin's wars, for example Turkey's recent bombing of Kurdish areas in Syria and Azerbaijan recent offensive against Armenia.

Peace activists must continue to fight against their own governments when they seek to raise military spending, entrench aggressive "defence" alliances and promote fear and hatred of other peoples. But this cannot be at the expense of denying support to other people fighting back against wars of aggression waged by "our" government's rivals.

The best way to fight for lasting peace is by supporting all struggles of peoples fighting wars of self-defence, be they in Vietnam or Iraq yesterday, or Ukraine or Rojava today.

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