

US: No arms to Ukraine?

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Nate Moore explains why U.S. based socialists should not be opposing arms to Ukraine despite the inter-imperialist dynamics unleashed by the Russian invasion.

What position should socialists take regarding U.S./NATO arms to Ukraine? Recently, Left Voice has engaged in a [debate](#) with other principled anti-imperialist socialists on this question. In November, the DSA caucus Reform and Revolution hosted a similar [debate](#). The Revolutionary Socialist Organizing Project (RSOP), Seattle Revolutionary Socialists, and Denver Communists contributed to the [Left Voice discussion](#). Their statement characterizes the war in the following manner: “The war in Ukraine is not only a war of national independence. It is also an inter-imperialist conflict.”

In other words, the “war of national independence” exists side by side with “an inter-imperialist conflict.” Both are primary considerations, neither one secondary. Nevertheless, treating them as such, the inter-imperialist nature of the war objectively becomes the primary consideration despite intentions to treat both equally. Sending arms escalates the Russian-U.S. imperialist rivalry.

Consequently, they argue against U.S. arms to Ukraine. The inter-imperial conflict is placed in the foreground while Ukraine’s national struggle recedes to the background. This position, shared by Left Voice, Denver Communists, and RSN, makes opposing U.S. military intervention, opposing sanctions against Russia, and actively opposing any U.S. arms shipments to Ukraine, the primary task of the U.S. Left.

In a debate with Left Voice, Workers Voice [provides](#) a different description of the war: “The character of the war ... is a national liberation war against Russian imperialist aggression.” Accordingly, they support Ukraine receiving U.S. arms. For *Workers Voice*, the national liberation character of the war is primary; the inter-imperialist conflict surrounding it is an important, but secondary, consideration.

The Tempest Collective has framed the [question](#) of the war, aid, and arms in a similar manner: “Against [Russia’s] imperialist invasion, Ukraine has waged a national popular struggle for self-determination. It is fighting for its right to exist as a nation with its own government.” And: “This war is between Russia and Ukraine, not between Russia and the U.S. It is not an inter-imperialist war. Of course, there is an inter-imperialist conflict behind the war.”

Thus, how one characterizes the Ukraine war shapes one’s position regarding U.S. military arms to Ukraine.

The common framework Tempest shares with others regarding the Ukraine war can be summarized thus:

1. Russia is waging a war of imperialist aggression in Ukraine. Ukraine is fighting a war of national liberation.
2. U.S. and NATO arms have contributed to Ukraine’s success in beating back the Russian invasion.

3. The U.S. and NATO have not invaded Ukraine, and both have actively sought to avoid direct confrontation with Russia and escalation beyond the borders of Ukraine. Therefore, their imperialist relation to Ukraine cannot be equated with Russia's at the moment. The immediate threat to Ukraine is Russia, not the U.S. and NATO.
4. The U.S. naturally has imperial interests in this conflict. Through arms and aid to Ukraine, it hopes to strengthen its position against Russia over the long term.

It is worth interrogating each aspect of this framework.

What makes the Russian invasion “imperialist”? Why is Ukraine's war one of national liberation?

Imperialism is the competition among economically stronger nation-states to gain advantage over one another through access to world markets and resources. Imperialist domination of economically stronger states over smaller countries takes on many forms (military, economic, political, cultural, social).

Russia is an [imperialist power](#). It possesses the second largest military in the world. Monopolies dominate the economy in a variety of sectors: oil and gas, steel, nuclear energy, transportation, and non-ferrous metals. The country has little debt with other countries and engages in significant Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Much of this investment is funneled to tax havens. From there, Russian capital returns to the domestic economy but is also redirected to ventures in developing nations.

In the multi-polar world of today, Russian imperialism jockeys for power in competition with larger imperialist powers: the U.S. and China. This will continue to be the background in which national liberation movements develop during this century. It would be utopian to anticipate a “pure” struggle of a small nation that does not have to tussle with the larger bullies of this world.

The Ukrainian people are engaged in a struggle for national liberation. The [entire country is mobilized](#) against the Russian invasion. This is the case even in the predominantly Russian-speaking eastern regions of the country. There is a growing resistance among the people in those regions that has been forced underground. In these regions Russia has established a military occupation, [appropriated factories](#) for its own oligarchs, destroyed the educational and health infrastructure of whole cities and towns, and engaged in brutal acts of rape and torture.

The RSOP statement sees the U.S. imperial interest in the conflict as shaping all other concerns. It is the foundation on which its faulty slogan of “no U.S./NATO arms” rests. By comparing Ukraine today with Serbia in 1914, the RSOP statement reduces the character of the Ukrainian national liberation struggle to the imperialist conflict surrounding it. Serbia in 1914 is the most extreme example of a national liberation struggle being subsumed by an imperialist struggle of world powers.

Imperialist rivalry today is not like Europe in 1914. In that case, a number of industrially developed nations of relatively similar size and in the relatively small geographical space of the European continent were engaged in an accelerated arms race, making the immanence of a worldwide war highly probable, if not inevitable. The Serbian national struggle simply served as the spark to a building confrontation.

Today, [the world imperialist system is not symmetrical](#) like it was in 1914. The U.S. remains by far the largest military power and one of the strongest economies despite having lost its unilateral position following the 2008 economic crisis. China, although matching the U.S. in economic strength, is well behind the U.S. in military capability. Russia possesses threatening military might

but does not possess an economy as strong or dynamic as the U.S. or China. These inequities among the current dominant imperialist nations dissuade these nations from open confrontation.

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Of course, inter-imperial rivalry is ever-present and building toward a potential symmetry in the future that could produce a global conflagration similar to 1914. But while the system remains asymmetrical, nations remain cautious and are carrying out the inter-imperial rivalry through indirect means. Russia has invaded Ukraine but has not declared war on the U.S. Likewise, the U.S. has not declared war on Russia and instead hopes to gain an inter-imperial advantage against Russia through aid and arms to Ukraine. Therefore, comparing the national liberation struggle of Ukraine today with Serbia in the run up to World War I is not only inaccurate but it leads one to conclude that the issue of Ukrainian national oppression cannot be raised without leading to a global imperialist war.

Historically, most [national liberation struggles](#) in the 20th century did not spark a broader inter-imperial war. Socialists were obligated, on the principled basis of defending basic democratic rights, to support the military struggle of these oppressed countries over their imperialist aggressor.

Furthermore, imperialism is not reducible to military aid and arms. Following Carl von Clausewitz, “War is politics by other means.” Indeed, an imperialist power’s non-provision of arms can be just as much in its interest as provision depending on the circumstance. Either course is a strategic and tactical calculation on the part of an imperial state as to what will best ensure domination.

The Syrian revolution (2011-2015) was crushed by authoritarian leader Bashar al-Assad with Russian backing. At one point in the struggle, [looked as if Assad would fall](#) and the democratic forces driving the revolution would succeed. U.S. military arms and aid could have benefited the Syrian struggle. However, the U.S. state [decided](#) it was not in its interest to send arms. Instead, it ignored the democratic revolution (seeing it as a greater evil to authoritarian stability under Assad) and reached a [tacit agreement](#) with Russia to not challenge its support for Assad in crushing the revolution.

Is this not imperialism in action? Wasn’t the non-provision of aid to the Syrian revolution just as much in the interests of U.S. and Russian imperialism? The appropriate response for socialists in this instance would have been to support the right of Syrians to obtain weapons from the U.S. in their democratic revolution against Assad and Russian imperialism.

Can imperialist arms fight imperialism?

There have been other instances where arms from one imperialist country could have, or did, help a colonized nation, or a country facing imperialist invasions.

In 1918, the Bolshevik Party debated whether they should use Anglo-French arms to fight the Germans, the more immediate threat. The “Left Communist” faction argued against arms as that would have been a concession to imperialism. Lenin was unable to attend the meeting where the debate took place but submitted [a note](#) to make his opinion known: “Please include my vote in favor of getting potatoes and arms from the bandits of Anglo-French imperialism.” The Party ultimately voted to accept arms from capitalist countries while emphasizing the need for political independence.

On more than one occasion, Lenin ([here](#) and [here](#)) defended the right of nations engaged in anti-imperialist struggles to receive arms from other imperialist powers. As precedent Lenin referred to the example of France supplying arms to fight the British during the American Revolution.

Around the time of World War I, Irish republicans, with the backing of socialists like James Connolly, actively [sought and received arms](#) from the Imperial German government.

During World War II, some socialists supported the right of nationalist political forces in China to receive weapons and aid from the U.S. to defeat the imperialist Japanese invasion of that country. They argued that receiving aid and arms from an imperialist nation did not change the character of the nationalist struggle or subordinate the agency of that country to the role of U.S. imperialist stooge.

[During the Vietnam War](#), the USSR and China, in competition with one another and with U.S. imperialism, delivered arms to the Vietnamese to fight the U.S. Although these were oppressive societies, third camp socialists did not advocate preventing arms from being sent to the Vietnamese resistance.

In each case it was correct for socialists to support the right of these nations to receive arms from imperialist nations. All of these armed struggles involved a fight for basic democratic rights and/or a national liberation struggle for democratic control over their respective countries. Some socialists residing in imperialist nations supported the ability to obtain and use imperialist arms against imperialism. This was the only way to establish genuine international solidarity of the working class and oppressed.

What position should socialists take today?

If we are genuinely interested in the right of Ukraine to liberate itself, it does not make sense for the Left to oppose the U.S. sending arms to Ukraine. Imagine a U.S. socialist saying to a Ukrainian, “We support your right to demand and receive arms, but we actively oppose our state sending, and you receiving, those arms. Go plead elsewhere.” This position is not merely contradictory, but also patronizing and condescending; worse, to disarm Ukraine helps Russia consolidate its imperial position.

Does supporting U.S. arms to Ukraine mean that we should explicitly call on the U.S. state to send arms? No. We are leaving that to the Ukrainians. Our role is to not get in the way of their legitimate self-defense and to find other ways of building material solidarity and international ties to the Ukrainian and eastern European Left and social and trade union movements.

Ukraine is a country facing an emergency. The entire nation has been impacted by Russia’s invasion and the overwhelming majority of its people support the call for arms, which the U.S. has obliged. Nonetheless, the U.S. state is not sending arms out of a humanitarian interest. Its interest is a cold, calculating and imperial one. The U.S. is no ally to the democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian people.

If Ukraine defeats Russia or reaches an agreement it deems suitable to its democratic aspirations, it will then be in a better position to confront the U.S. state’s involvement in its affairs. Our role as socialists in the U.S. would then be to shift from our solidarity in the Ukrainian fight against Russian imperialism to a position of confronting U.S. imperialism. The Ukrainian people are the subject in the struggle. This is the only basis for international solidarity.

To support Ukrainians’ right to receive arms from the U.S. is consistent with principled anti-imperialism. On the other hand, the same cannot be said with the “stop U.S. arms”

position, one which would disarm ... the Ukrainian people under the heel of Russian imperialism.

An implicit assumption of the “stop U.S. arms” position is that Ukraine will not be able to confront U.S. imperialism because the aid received heretofore has overly strengthened the U.S. imperialist position and control over the Ukrainian state. This not only projects a future that is unknowable, but worse, expresses little confidence in the Ukrainian people to struggle— a patronizing and condescending position directed at a nation that has reversed Russian military success since the invasion. Moreover, we should not assume that Ukrainians will accept whatever “strings” or other terms the U.S. attempts to impose.

This position also denies from the beginning that the international Left has the capacity to build true solidaristic ties based on our defense of the democratic rights of Ukrainians. When we raise our criticisms of western imperialism in Ukraine and eastern Europe with the natural audience for the Left in that region, why should we expect to be taken seriously when we are denying their agency and objectively aligning with the imperial power who has for decades undermined their national rights?

Consequently, a position of abstention (neither calling for, nor active opposition to) the U.S. state sending arms to Ukraine makes sense for socialists right now. Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky reached a similar conclusion considering this hypothetical situation: A fascist imperialist Italy sending arms to a colonized Algeria fighting the imperialist aggression of democratic France. He argued that it would be untenable to actively oppose the provision of that aid.

Socialists should criticize the U.S. imperial motives behind the sending of arms. If the U.S. had not sent arms to Ukraine, as in Syria, socialists would criticize their inaction as proof of their betrayal of democratic principles. From a liberal perspective, this combination of positions is contradictory and disingenuous. From an anti-imperialist perspective, it is perfectly consistent.

Conclusion

To support Ukrainians’ right to receive arms from the U.S. is consistent with principled anti-imperialism. On the other hand, the same cannot be said with the “stop U.S. arms” position, one which would disarm a national liberation movement and leave the Ukrainian people under the heel of Russian imperialism.

Saying that U.S. arms provision automatically leads to supporting U.S. imperialism falsely reduces imperialism to military arms, whereas it is only one policy within a much broader phenomenon. Doing so also assumes as absolute what is yet to be determined: that U.S. imperial objectives behind the provision of arms will be realized and the U.S. imperial state irrevocably empowered. Furthermore, it falls into a formalistic error of abstraction, equating U.S. and Russian imperialisms in the concrete and immediate reality in which Ukrainians experience and face these powers today.

The multi-polar imperialist world order today is relatively less stable than the neoliberal period of U.S. unilateral domination. More national struggles of smaller nations are inevitable. The “stop U.S. arms” position leaves no room for these movements to be supported unless they remain “pure,”; that is, outside the meddling of the larger imperialist powers in their affairs. This is a “purity” that does not exist in the imperialist world system.

Perhaps most important, this position views the Ukrainian objective to expel Russia from their soil as indistinguishable from U.S. imperial designs for continued hegemony. In other words, the oppressed have no life outside that of their oppressors. This is hardly a recipe for articulating, or practicing,

principled anti-imperialism in the twenty-first century.

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P.S.

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