

Why is Ukrainian resistance invisible to you?

Tuesday 28 June 2022, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 27 June 2022).

An appeal to supporters of the Stop the War Coalition

Here are notes I made for a talk at an on-line meeting of the Stop the War Coalition's Brent (north-west London) branch tomorrow (28 June). I was due to speak alongside Lindsey German, national convenor of the STWC. But last week it turned out that she had an unavoidable clash, no-one else was available, and the event was cancelled.

I wrote to Brent STWC to say that I thought the cancellation was "a shame, politically speaking", because there have been "precious few meaningful exchanges of views between those in the UK labour movement who have a broadly 'plague-on-both-your-houses' view, such as Lindsey German, and those who believe support should be given to the Ukrainian resistance, such as myself".

An opportunity for discussion has been missed – while the biggest war in Europe since the middle of the last century rages.

I sent these notes to Brent STWC last week (as a pdf, [downloadable here](#)), and suggested discussion in spoken or written form. Obviously I don't care if that's in Brent or elsewhere. Please, engage with the arguments. Simon Pirani.

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Hello, thank you for inviting me.

I will start with a confession. When approached about this meeting, I was asked, as someone who has been travelling to both Russia and Ukraine for a long time, whether I could put Brent Stop the War in touch with a suitable Ukrainian speaker. I said I could not think of anyone, but that I could do it. In fact, I would have felt embarrassed, even ashamed, to ask a Ukrainian friend to speak here.

I imagined Ukrainian friends, who daily witness the most horrendous violence against their country, looking at the coalition's web site. I thought that they would feel that here was an organisation utterly removed from Ukrainian reality. An organisation that – unlike some significant Russian anti-war organisations – is interested neither in Ukrainian communities' suffering, nor in those communities' response to that suffering. An organisation that seems uncritically to accept, and even repeat, Russian government propaganda.

I am not trying to speak for Ukrainians. I am explaining why I would hesitate to ask them to break off from the life and death issues they are dealing with, to interact with an organisation that appears unable to address the causes of their grief.

I will talk about four political issues related to the war, and finish up with some practical suggestions, as I have been asked to do.

1. The Ukrainian population

The Ukrainian population, which is both combatant and victim in the war, is literally invisible on the Stop the War web site. I know that Stop the War is a coalition, but the site is its public face, and the Ukrainian population is invisible there.

President Putin said on the first day of the invasion that he expected Ukrainians to greet the Russian troops with flowers, and sections of the Ukrainian armed forces to revolt. Why did these things not happen? In my view it's because most Ukrainians support the resistance to a one-sided, aggressive war, in which the Russian army is targeting civilians with massacres, rapes and executions. They do not see it as a war of two equal sides.

Real Ukrainians fighting in volunteer units, or medical or transport workers risking their lives, or Ukrainians in London raising money for bullet-proof vests, are invisible in the imaginary Stop the War world. There, they are only "NATO proxies". But that world bears no relation to the Ukraine they live in, or have migrated from.

Here is a question to Lindsey German. In May last year, you [wrote](#) that Stop the War is "supporting the people of Palestine, who have a right to resist occupation". I agree with that. But why no such statement about Ukraine?

And if Ukrainians, or Palestinians, have a right to resist, what does it mean? Does it only mean standing up to tanks with your bare hands, as Ukrainians have had to do? Does it mean throwing stones, often the only weapons that young Palestinians have? What about proper weapons? Do you think Palestinians have a right to those? And Ukrainians?

I don't think these are easy questions to answer. But if we don't acknowledge a right to resist, we won't even be asking them. And anyone's attitude to stopping the war in Ukraine, or the war against Palestine or any other war, is bound to be shaped by their attitude to this right to resistance.

2. This is an imperialist war of aggression

Russia is in the second rank of imperialist powers, and part of the driving force of its militarism is to make up for economic weakness. Nevertheless, it is an imperial power. There is no mention of this on the Stop the War web site.

On the contrary, there are indications that prominent spokespeople for Stop the War thinks that Putin has a point, when he talks about re-integrating Russia's old colonies into what he calls the "Russian world".

For example, Andrew Murray, [writing](#) on the web site, quoted Putin's historical article about Russia and Ukraine published last summer. Murray picked out an assertion by Putin that he said he agreed with: that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, "all those territories, and, which is more important, people, found themselves abroad overnight, taken away from their historical motherland".

When Putin speaks about Russia being the "historical motherland", it sends chills down the spines not only of Ukrainians, but of people in the Caucasus and central Asia whose countries were forcibly incorporated into the Russian empire in the 19th century, and in the Baltic states, which after some decades of independence were re-incorporated into the Soviet Union under a secret agreement between Stalin and Hitler. It's maybe similar to the feeling Irish people would get, if British politicians were to tell them that Ireland is part of a historical British motherland.

To embrace this rhetoric is to embrace great-power chauvinism. What does that have to do with stopping any war anywhere?

Many wars, including this one, have some elements of people's war and some elements of inter-state conflict. In the Stop the War coalition, the idea that Ukrainians are fighting a proxy war for NATO is very widespread. But why, then, does no-one suggest that, in some respects, Palestinians are fighting a proxy war for some of the Arab states? Would that invalidate their right to resist Israeli apartheid? No. One could argue that in the 1960s and 70s, the Vietnamese were in some respects fighting a proxy war for the Soviet Union and China. Did this invalidate their resistance? No.

3. This war started in 2014

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February enlarged a war, waged by Russia from 2014, in which 17,000 people died and millions were driven from their homes. The Stop the War coalition did not oppose that war.

That war followed the overthrow of president Yanukovich of Ukraine by mass protests. The character of these protests continues to be fiercely debated. They were messy and complicated, and there is no doubt that fascists were active in them, as were vast numbers of other people.

Within weeks, separatists in eastern Ukraine began an armed insurgency, supported by a Russian army invasion.

From any working class or socialist point of view, Ukraine in 2014 had plenty of problems. The tensions in the eastern regions, cynically played on by politicians there, was one of these. But nothing made things worse, more quickly, than the Russian military action.

Why did Stop the War not oppose this invasion? Partly, I presume, it was influenced by the argument in Andrew Murray's article that I mentioned. It's a travesty. Murray claims that Yanukovich was overthrown by a coup, which is absurd and untrue – it was a mass movement, whether you, or I, like that movement or not. Murray paints in sympathetic colours the separatists, although their leaders were strongly influenced by extreme Russian nationalism and fascism from the start.

But most harmfully and deceitfully, Murray did not even mention the main factor that turned civil conflict into war: Russia's military action. Another invisible.

Stop the War did not oppose this Russian imperial adventure. Furthermore, in 2016, the coalition went out of its way to support the Russian political commentator Boris Kagarlitsky on the grounds that he was an "anti war activist", despite the fact that – in contrast to many Russian socialists and trade unionists – he wholeheartedly supported the military action.

I wrote an [open letter](#) to Stop the War, asking why you supported a warmonger. I emailed every single executive member individually. I received no response at all. I ask here that the executive review the letter and answer it. It remains relevant. If you can not tell the difference between warmongers and anti war activists, you will never effectively oppose any war.

The final point about 2014 is the nightmare being lived by those Ukrainians in the areas occupied by Russia then. Half the population had left by 2017. The regimes that governed those who remained were lawless and dictatorial, destroying labour rights and civil rights. Knowledge of the hardship and brutality in those areas has been a motivation for Ukrainians resisting Russian occupation in other eastern regions.

4. Russian and the western powers

If the Stop the War coalition takes war seriously, it will engage in a serious discussion about the issue of NATO expansion. According to some of Stop the War's spokespeople, this is a cause – even,

the main cause – of the war in Ukraine. And since NATO expansion, together with so called “denazification”, were the Kremlin’s main pretexts for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February, this is a live political issue.

The idea that Russia feels threatened by NATO moving to its borders is repeated in many articles on the Stop the War web site. But obviously, in the real world, things are not so simple. (i) Russia has had NATO countries on its borders since 2004. (ii) Ukraine has never had a NATO membership action plan. And public support for joining NATO was very low, until Russia invaded in 2014. Cause and effect are mixed up, time and time again, in the articles you publish.

Are you, as supporters of Stop the War, serious about analysing relationships between different imperialist countries? The focus on NATO expansion is based on a misreading of the actual dynamic between Russia and the NATO powers. Those powers supported the murderous Russian assault on Chechnya with which Putin began his presidency. Then, whatever their public statements, they treated the Putin regime as a gendarme that would control its own sphere of influence.

This included Georgia, which Russia invaded in 2008. It included Syria, where Russia, tolerated by the western powers, militarily supported the massacre of civilians by the Assad government in 2016 – another slaughter that was largely invisible for Stop the War.

This tacit alliance between the western powers and the Kremlin has been broken by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine this year. But that can not be understood on the basis of such a one-sided view of what went before.

Practical points

I have been asked to point to practical things that people could do about the war. The things that I believe make sense are not about state policy, but in the sphere of civil society and the labour movement.

First, French, Austrian and other trade unions have organised convoys of material and medical aid to Ukrainian communities. I think such initiatives are valuable.

The Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine, which supports workers’ organisations in conflict areas, and territorial defence units, also welcomes this type of support from outside Ukraine.

An initiative that I have participated in is seeking ways for civil society and labour organisations outside Ukraine to help support Ukrainians in the Russian-occupied territories. We have [two public zoom calls](#) coming up, with Ukrainian activists, about this. I invite people to join.

Here in the UK, as well as supporting refugees, as I am sure many people here do, I suggest following what Ukrainian organisations are doing. Here in London we have the Ukrainian Institute, which runs a first-class programme of informational and education events. Listening to Ukrainians, and becoming well-informed, would be good steps to take.

- ***Public zoom calls with Ukrainian activists, on the situation in the Russian-occupied areas – Monday 4 July and Thursday 14 July. [Details and link to registration here.](#)***

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P.S.

People and Nature

<https://peopleandnature.wordpress.com/2022/06/27/why-is-ukrainian-resistance-invisible-to-you/>