

Ukraine and the peace movement

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It is urgent to end the war in Ukraine. But to achieve this goal, “Russia Out Now” is a better slogan than “Diplomacy Now.”

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The global peace movement has in general an admirable history of opposing wars that have caused so much suffering over the years. Activists have championed peace and social justice from Vietnam to Central America to Iraq, helping teach the world that in place of death and destruction, xenophobia and intolerance, we can work to resolve conflicts peacefully while devoting our efforts to meeting real human needs. The peace movement has long pointed out the gargantuan waste represented by spending on war. If all the money spent on weapons of death had been redirected towards human needs, poverty and hunger could have been wiped out long ago.

And so, given our admiration and appreciation for the peace movement, we have been disappointed and a little surprised to find ourselves at odds on the question of Ukraine with people with whom in the past we have frequently marched for peace.

Here’s where we agree with the peace movement. First, we both oppose Vladimir Putin’s invasion and occupation of regions of Ukraine. We agree that Ukraine is an independent nation and that Russia is the aggressor. Second, we both sympathize with the soldiers and civilians who are dying and being displaced or forced into exile by this war. Third, we both oppose militarism and war and understand that NATO—while not directly responsible for this war—also represents a problem because it is a military alliance. In the early 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Union, new structures of mutual security should have been built instead of expanding Washington’s Cold War alliance.

Having this much in common, we should be able to have a fruitful discussion and perhaps find ways to engage in some common actions. Our ability to discuss these matters does not, however, extend to those who have excused or even supported Russia, or who, ignoring Russia’s primary responsibility for the aggression, want to blame the United States or NATO or the European Union for the war. Their support for Russia excludes them both from the peace movement and from the call for international solidarity with the victims of aggression.

The peace movement, it seems to us, has made three arguments for its demands for diplomacy and peace now. First, U.S. support of weapons for Ukraine prolongs the war. Second, the provision of arms takes money from the U.S. budget that would otherwise be allocated to important social programs in the areas of housing, education, social welfare, and the environment. Third, the Ukraine war threatens to disrupt grain production and distribution and, by reducing supply and causing a rise in prices, will lead to mass hunger in the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions of the

Global South. Let's look at each of these arguments in turn.

Militarism and War

In considering the argument that aid to Ukraine promotes militarism and war, the starting point has to be: "Do you believe that a country that has been unjustly attacked has the right to defend itself?" If so, and if the country lacks the means to defend itself, is it entitled to receive arms from outside? Though the peace movement wants a world in which no disputes are settled by war, until such a world exists it cannot deny other peoples, such as the Ukrainians, the right of self-defense.

Some in the peace movement, of course, are absolute pacifists who believe that war is always wrong and counter-productive, even in cases of self-defense. Much of what pacifists say about war is extremely valuable: they note the long-term costs that are often left out of the cost-benefit analyses of the decision to take up arms, among them the regimentation of societies at war, the inevitable civilian deaths, and the brutalized sensibilities that afflict even the most virtuous warriors. Most of us in the peace movement are not absolute pacifists. We generally believe that, even acknowledging these costs, there are still times when military resistance against an aggressor is justified. Absolute pacifists disagree, but it would be extremely unlikely that even a pacifist who believed in justice would denounce someone for providing arms to a victim of aggression. So, there is no reason why the peace movement should attack the provision of arms to Ukraine.

Some pacifists call upon victims of aggression to use non-violent civil disobedience or other means to resist. To be sure, civilian resistance and other forms of nonviolent resistance can be much more effective than commonly believed, and it is right for the peace movement to make this point and advocate for such policies. But it seems inappropriate for outsiders to tell Ukrainians as the bombs are falling that they must use only nonviolence or raise the white flag and surrender.

The peace movement believes in peace, but of course it doesn't consider peace to be the only value. That's why many peace organizations list peace and justice as their joint missions. Historically, the great majority of peace forces concluded that, while failing to resist Hitler's armies might have led to peace, it would not have led to a better world. Likewise, at the time of the U.S. Civil War, acquiescing in the Confederacy's secession would have secured peace but at the expense of the continuing horrors of slavery. In the case of Ukraine, war causes great harm to social justice along many dimensions. But surrender—for that is what peace at any cost means—also causes terrible harm to social justice. Putin has said he would eliminate Ukraine as a nation and the Ukrainians as a people, arguing that they are part of Russia. He wishes to conquer Ukraine and bring it under his authoritarian rule, in a society without democracy or civil liberties. So we ask, war or surrender? Which causes more harm? Can outsiders really judge that for Ukrainians?

The peace movement didn't in the name of peace call for the Soviet Union or China to stop providing arms to North Vietnam, or for Eastern European Communist nations to discontinue the provision of weapons to the Sandinistas in the 1980s. Leftists and liberals didn't consider the Western denial of weapons to the Spanish Republic in the 1930s an expression of peace but a failure of political will on the part of the democratic nations, if not a disguised sympathy for Franco.

In the past, of course, we have often opposed arms exports because they prop up human-rights-abusing regimes. But in this case, the weapons are an attempt to assist a people who have been unjustly attacked in defending themselves, just as was the aim of Lend-Lease to Britain and the USSR during World War II.

Some might argue that Vietnam and Republican Spain were progressive governments, while Ukraine

is corrupt or even fascist. We believe that the character of the government is not the key issue, but rather the fact that it is engaged in a justified anti-imperialist struggle of national self-determination. When from 1935 to 1937 Italy made war on Ethiopia, most of the Left supported the latter even though Emperor Haile Selassie's government was authoritarian and reactionary. The Left did so because it was important to support a sovereign nation against Italian Fascist imperialism, a regime that by 1936 was allied with Nazi Germany. The essence of the position is anti-imperialism and the defense of self-determination.

The case of Ukraine, however, is much easier to decide. Ukraine, which has had problems with foreign meddling from all sides and entrenched corruption, is fundamentally a democratic country, with leaders who have been replaced in elections. There are civil liberties, though undoubtedly under threat, especially under conditions of war. Like other nations around the world, it has a far right and neo-Nazi organizations, among them the notorious Azov brigade. These forces, however, have fared poorly in elections and do not control President Volodymyr Zelensky's neoliberal government. Within Ukraine, there is a legal, democratic socialist left that some of us in the U.S. Left have been supporting.

While we believe Ukraine has the right to get arms wherever it can to defend itself, we recognize that the direct involvement of the United States or NATO could lead either led to a broader European war or to the use of nuclear arms. We should be vigilant and oppose any such development. And, if things get to the point where the Zelensky government is continuing the war contrary to the wishes of the Ukrainian population, then it would right for outsiders to object to shipping further arms. But polls—limited as they are in time of war—suggest that this is not currently the case.

Many on the Left have suggested that Washington is pursuing a “proxy war” against Russia and that it is pushing the Ukrainians to “fight until the last Ukrainian.” Of course, the United States would like to see a weakened Russia, but it is hardly the case that the Ukrainians are persevering only because of U.S. pressure. The Ukrainians fight of their own volition, and the United States cannot make them fight, though it could force them to surrender by refusing them arms. Indeed, it is clear that the Biden administration and other Western leaders are quite worried about the economic consequences of a long war and the risks to their other geopolitical interests.

The Arms for Ukraine and Social Spending

Long before Russia invaded Ukraine, the Biden administration found its congressional support too narrow to pass its social program. Holding a bare majority in the Senate, the Democrats could not overcome the undemocratic filibuster and the defections of one or two rightwing Democrats. Biden's program has also suffered because of former president Donald Trump's tax cuts and the failure of the Democrats to restore the higher tax rates on corporations and the wealthy.

A progressive tax policy could easily fund Build Back Better and arms to Ukraine. Aid to Ukraine would not have affected a single vote in Congress regarding Build Back Better.

Some U.S. peace movement activists have criticized progressives in Congress for voting for military and economic aid to Ukraine while their social agenda (for a Green New Deal or Medicare for All) has yet to be addressed. But the support for Ukraine from congressional progressives has not led them to abandon their social agenda. Nor is it the case that, but for the Ukraine aid, the Green New Deal and other progressive legislation would have been enacted. U.S. spending on arms for Ukraine has had absolutely no impact on the country's social budget, though it might if the war continues long enough or expands.

Hunger in the Global South

The peace movement is also rightly concerned about the impact of the Ukraine war on the supply of food to Africa and other parts of the global South. As one of the world's leading grain producers, Ukraine has seen its shipments blocked by fighting in agricultural areas, and Russian troops have burned fields and attacked Ukrainian grain elevators and ports. True, if Ukraine were to surrender tomorrow, grain exports—limited by the damage already done by the war—could be resumed. But of course, if Russia ceased its military onslaught and withdrew its invading forces, grain exports could also be resumed.

To prevent the horrendous consequences of Russian aggression on the people of the Third World, should the peace movement call for Ukraine to sue for peace and likely lose its sovereignty? No, it should call for Russia to end the war and withdraw from Ukraine. If it does not, we should pursue other ways of getting food to those in need. For example, we could call upon the United Nations General Assembly to use its power under the Uniting for Peace resolution (which is not subject to veto) to escort grain ships to and from Ukrainian ports. We should not call for unilateral action by the United States to protect grain shipments, which could be seen as a provocation. But a UN-authorized humanitarian escort would be quite different. Insurance carriers might be reluctant to cover vessels sailing into the Black Sea, but the European Union could offer the coverage. The key principle here is this: the peace movement should not demand that Ukraine give up its freedom because Russia is holding the Global South's food supplies hostage when other less onerous solutions are available.

The Question of Diplomacy

The peace movement has a standard position in favor of diplomacy over war. But think about the Vietnam war. While many liberal opponents of the war called for "Negotiations Now," the demand of the radical anti-war movement—made up of millions who marched in the streets—was "Out Now." Their point was that the United States had no moral rights in Vietnam and therefore there was nothing for it to negotiate. It needed simply to withdraw its troops. The radicals knew, of course, that despite the demands of justice, the United States was unlikely to simply pick up and leave and that there would be negotiations. We also knew that Vietnam would negotiate, and we wouldn't criticize them for doing so—it was their call—but we also understood that what happened on the battlefield would affect the outcome of any negotiations. So while we wanted peace, we supported Vietnam's struggle for independence against the United States.

The same is true in Ukraine today. Justice demands immediate and unconditional Russian withdrawal from all of Ukraine. Russian anti-war activists have also taken this position. We say to Russia as we once said to the United States: "Out Now!"

In fact, like nearly all wars, this one will almost certainly end in some sort of negotiated agreement. But the nature of that agreement—whether the Ukrainian people will be able to continue to exist as an independent and sovereign nation—will depend on the military situation there. This in turn will depend on the political situation and the degree of solidarity with Ukraine throughout the world. Without foreign arms, Ukraine will be forced to accept a horrible agreement that could dismember the country or even end its independent existence and democratic government. With arms, they can win the war, reclaim all of their territory, and defend their democratic government or, if not, reach a settlement they find acceptable. Is the death and destruction that will ensue worth it? How can that be a decision of anyone but the people of Ukraine?

We share the peace movement's desire to end militarism and war and to dismantle military alliances and end the threat of nuclear annihilation. NATO should be dismantled and replaced with treaties guaranteeing respect for national sovereignty and reducing military bases and arms. Wealthy nations like the United States, China, Japan, and the European Union have a responsibility to ensure that the Global South is free from hunger. With all of this in common, let's open a genuine dialogue on the question of Ukraine's right to self-determination and self-defense within the context of establishing a world that is more democratic, more equal, and more secure for all.

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P.S.

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