

A Letter from the Editors of Against the Current (US): Clarity on Ukraine

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As Russia's invasion and its global impacts spread with ruinous impact, it's high time for factual, political and moral clarity on what this war is about. That requires sorting out a great deal of ideological mythology on all sides.

Contents

- [A Proxy War?](#)
- [Against "Campism" and All \(...\)](#)

It shouldn't be surprising, we suppose, that this war has cut through usual political dividing lines on the right as well as the left. There's a barely disguised pro-Putin wing in the U.S. Republican Party, generally aligned with Trump/MAGA forces.

More "traditional" neoconservative militarists (and some of the Democratic establishment) see an opportunity to use Ukraine as the battering ram to bring down the Russian regime and cripple its ally China. Others like Henry Kissinger, whose unquestionable imperialist war criminal credentials span four decades of the 20th century, call for Ukrainian "territorial concessions" - meaning surrender and dismemberment — in the interests of stability.

Among parties of the European far right, the German AfD and French Rally (Marine Le Pen) openly sympathize with Russia, while the Polish "Law and Justice" ruling party is militantly pro-NATO, the Hungarian Christian-nationalist regime of Viktor Orban plays both sides, and the newly elected far-right coalition in Italy appears itself to be divided on the war.

The divisions among these reactionary, racist forces and governments are largely conditioned by how to manipulate nationalist sentiments and public fears over Europe's economic woes; by opportunistic hopes of aligning with what will turn out to be the "winning side;" and by the scramble to secure energy from Russian oil and gas in a pending bitter winter.

On the left, meanwhile, the divisions are over the meaning of imperialism and how to oppose it - in particular, the problem posed by a war in which the aggressor is not "our own" imperialist power, as it has been from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq and so many in between. The fact that U.S. imperialism is as vicious and destructive as ever is not the central issue in the present war.

Socialists need to be clear about our position: We support *Ukraine's* war of national survival and its right to receive assistance. We do not support *NATO*. Thanks to Putin, in fact, NATO and U.S. imperialism have already accomplished strategic goals: NATO's shaky unity is restored, Finland and Sweden are joining, Germany is ramping up its military spending to and probably beyond the 2% of GDP level, and U.S. "leadership" of the alliance is no longer in question.

To help pose the central questions, elsewhere in this issue we publish an excerpt from a powerful statement by Ukrainian and other European leftists. The full text is available, [“Support Ukrainian Resistance and Disempower Fossil Capital.”](#)

First and foremost, this statement presents a powerful case for *Ukraine’s right of self-defense against a brutal Russian invasion*. The fundamental reality is that this invasion has explicitly stated annexationist objectives and, were it to succeed, a genocidal trajectory that’s already been evidenced in the slaughters of civilians and forced population removals in Russian-occupied territory.

The statement is also clear about the imperialist character of NATO, what it stands for, and the demand for its dissolution and the forging of an anti-militarist alternative to great-power blocs. While addressing a document from part of the German left, its arguments are highly relevant to the debate in the U.S. left, where sectors of the peace movement oppose Ukraine’s right to obtain weapons on the grounds that “arming Ukraine only prolongs the war and suffering.”

These forces, we are sorry to say, include pacifist-leaning organizations – including CodePink, RootsAction and World Beyond War — that have done excellent work around many issues such as the U.S.-Saudi-backed war in Yemen, Washington’s sadistic cutoff of Afghanistan’s foreign reserves, and more.

It is painful to see these groups’ inability to understand the legitimacy of Ukraine’s war against Putin’s invasion, or the deluded notion that Ukrainian surrender or acceptance of territorial amputation would bring “peace through negotiations,” or even the unworldly idea that peaceful resistance by itself would turn back Russian tanks.

A Proxy War?

We don’t suggest these antiwar voices are supporters of Putin, or that they’re anything but sincere in their horror – which anyone with human feelings must fully share – over the death and destruction that’s being inflicted every day on Ukraine and its people.

Rather, the problem is their disorientation over a war that’s not “our own” imperialist crime – and their refusal to address the issue of *Ukraine’s right of self-defense*. CodePink and RootsAction representatives in particular have declined to answer this question when repeatedly and directly asked. To be sure, they voice their support of Russian draft refusers and the revived Russian antiwar movement, which represents a great hope for us all – but that stance doesn’t respond to Ukraine’s rights.

To justify this unacceptable evasion, some of the U.S. peace movement, along with the International Committee of the Democratic Socialists of America, have come up with the formula of a “proxy war” in Ukraine between the United States and NATO on one side, versus Russia on the other, such that supporting Ukraine’s right to receive weapons means backing “our” imperialist side.

The argument is seductive because it sounds principled, because it points the finger at NATO’s aggressive post-1991 expansion to Russia’s borders, and because it reflects an aspect of reality – but in a highly distorted way. (For some discussion of these issues see our earlier editorial in ATC 218, [“Out of the Imperial Order: Chaos”](#) and [a statement by Solidarity.](#))

There is indeed a danger of the war growing to an inter-imperialist conflict – *particularly if Russia’s invasion is protracted*. The longer it takes Ukraine to defeat the invasion, the greater the danger that

the war might escalate and expand. That's especially true as Putin's moves to annex occupied territory, under the obscene pretext of fake "referendums" that no one takes seriously, make any prospect of negotiations even more distant.

It's profoundly mistaken, however, to elevate this potential danger to a primary immediate one — and even worse when leftists do so for essentially ideological reasons to rationalize abstention from supporting Ukraine.

Why? Critically, both NATO and Russian militaries have made clear — for reasons of their own interests — that they have no intention of escalating to direct confrontation. Biden will not supply Ukraine with artillery capable of striking inside Russia. As for Putin's purported threat to use nuclear weapons, that's meaningful more as a terrorist bluff than a serious military option. (Today's satellite-guided weapons of mass murder by precision artillery, high-tech drone strikes and the like make "tactical battlefield nukes" a blunt rather than efficient option.)

The argument that NATO expansion "provoked" the Russian invasion also falls apart on critical examination. As unjustified and triumphalist as it was, NATO's expansion to strategic states of eastern Europe was substantially completed more than a decade ago, including the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (1999), Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (2004), Albania and Croatia (2009). The additions of Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020) are hardly game-changers.

All this certainly contributed to the ascendance of Putin's sinister Great-Russian revanchism, but cannot be said to have "provoked," let alone justified, his assertions in 2021 that Ukraine "is not a real country" and that its people need to be incorporated (subjugated) under Russian rule.

Supposedly, Russia was also provoked by a 2008 promise of Ukraine itself joining NATO, a reckless and frankly stupid U.S.-inspired project — but the Russian regime surely understood that any such action would be vetoed by Germany (and after 2014 Ukraine was not eligible under NATO's own rules when it didn't control its territory of Crimea).

In any case, the danger of Ukraine joining NATO is the kind of issue that could have been resolved by a combination of diplomatic and semi-secret agreements. It's harder now with the outbreak of war where Ukraine's very existence is at stake.

Some on the left, for example the editors of *Monthly Review*, have argued at length that the Ukraine war is the culmination of longstanding U.S. intentions to cripple and then fragment Russia itself. Whatever the historical backdrop of such imperialist ambitions, the fact is that the *United States and NATO did not supply advanced weapons to Ukraine in advance of the invasion.*

Indeed, even though U.S. intelligence accurately predicted the invasion, Washington and other western capitals expected a Russian victory within days with the rapid fall of Kyiv and all of eastern Ukraine. Only the success of Ukraine's resistance, and the clear refusal of its population to tolerate any consideration of surrender, prompted the West to undertake massive arms supply and ramp up vital intelligence support of Ukraine's military.

It's understandable that those who don't or can't recognize the centrality of Ukraine's resistance and popular mobilization can only view this as a Western-inspired "proxy war." The blind reduction of Ukraine and its people to pawns on the great-power chessboard is a fatal obstacle for efforts to build a peace or anti-imperialist movement worthy of the name.

Against “Campism” and All Imperialism

There are even worse, pro-Russian so-called “campist” left voices who claim to see something “anti-imperialist” in Russia’s drive to stamp out Ukrainian independence and national existence, including the grotesquely misnamed United National Antiwar Coalition. (UNAC has held webinars featuring a former nuclear weapons inspector Scott Ritter, issuing half-deranged declarations that Russian triumph is inevitable and that Ukraine deserves to be destroyed.)

Support of Russia in this war is an absolute betrayal of basic democratic principle, without which any posturing about socialism is empty noise.

We can’t ignore all manner of bitter reactionary consequences of this war. These are gifts provided by Putin, free of charge, to western imperialism.

The suppression of women’s rights and the erosion of democracy in Poland are forgotten as that country becomes a U.S.-backed pillar of NATO’s strategic rearming. Palestine and its people are collateral damage, as happens in almost every international crisis -as the Israeli army’s near-daily murder of Palestinian young people and the destruction of occupied neighborhoods proceeds with almost no media attention.

The Russian regime’s ideological claim that “Ukraine was never a real country” strikingly parallels the longstanding Zionist argument that “there was never a Palestinian nation or state - in each case, justifying colonialism and annexation. More than 30,000 Ukrainian and Russian refugees have fled to Israel while Palestinians remain stateless in their own occupied homeland, or in exile.

At the same time, the threat of starvation in the Horn of Africa brought on by drought and climate change, as well as skyrocketing food prices in much of the Middle East and Asia, are exacerbated by the interruption of critical grain shipments from Ukraine and Russian fertilizer exports.

What will happen in the coming ominous winter months is an open question. We note that at the time when “Support Ukrainian Resistance and Disempower Fossil Capital” was written, the authors saw signs that economic and fuel supply pressures in Europe might be leading western countries to push Ukraine toward surrender. With recent Ukrainian advances and the brutal hardening of Putin’s stance - and the unknown consequences of Russia’ internal crises — that now appears less likely, but it’s important to understand that imperialism is infinitely treacherous and the twists and turns of policy are not necessarily predictable.

We do know that the rising stakes, as well as casualties and the scale of destruction, make clarity about this war all the more critical for any authentic socialist and anti-imperialist politics.

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