

Canada: Our key antiwar target: the Kremlin, or NATO? A conversation with a friend

Thursday 26 January 2023, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2023).

On January 11, I forwarded to the Socialist Project discussion list an interview with a Polish socialist Zofia Malisz: "[Razem: Building a left alternative in Poland](#)." She explained that when Russia invaded Ukraine her movement, Razem, had "absolutely no doubts that this invasion represented an existential threat to Ukraine, that there could be no compromise, and that our party's reaction was crucial." But, she added, "we were very disappointed with progressive organisations, including ones that at the time we belonged to, that kept silent right up to and after the invasion, and even after the Bucha massacre.

"This was disappointing but also, I admit, we may have been a bit blind to an obvious tendency that exists within part of the left to over-emphasise US imperialism while letting Russian imperialism off the hook. It quickly became clear a big part of that left is not able to accept what for us are two existential issues: that Ukraine is a sovereign state and that there is such a thing as Russian imperialism."

Soon after, I received a short message from another SP list member that said, in part, "Thanks for this important article and your other coverage of the region."

As I [reported earlier](#), [1] the SP list has featured a hot debate on the Ukraine war in which I have found myself part of a small minority that urges support of Ukraine's resistance to the Russian aggression, while major leaders of Socialist Project, critical of the Russian invasion if only on tactical grounds, portray the conflict as primarily "a proxy war" between NATO and Russia in which Ukrainians are portrayed as pawns of the US and NATO, their resistance often deprecated on the grounds that it is not led by socialists.

The SP list member with the encouraging message had not engaged with this debate. He is an old friend and comrade, so my interest was piqued. I responded: "I often wonder what you must be thinking about such issues as the Ukraine war. It would be nice to hear from you."

He soon responded:

"As for the Russia-Ukraine war, it calls to mind the case of Serbia in 1914.

"I found a recent Department of National Defence statement to be of interest. See:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2022/06/canada-and-latvia-sign-joint-declaration-to-augment-natos-enhanced-forward-presence-latvia.html>

"I think that 'NATO's advanced forward presence' should be opposed, whether in Latvia or further south."

Curious as to what this rather enigmatic response might indicate, I sought to tease out its meaning:

“On Ukraine, you cite Serbia in 1914, presumably a reference to the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia (following the assassination of the archduke) that touched off the inter-imperialist World War. This suggests you see the Ukraine conflict as essentially a war between NATO and Russia, Ukraine’s defense of its sovereignty as a secondary issue if not simply action as a proxy for the US and NATO. Correct me if I am wrong.

“As it happens, an Austrian comrade who has thought more than I have about this analogy has very recently published a critical response to some Trotskyist groups that draw much the same parallel. I am referring to Michael Pröbsting, who posts frequently on Marxmail and has been published on sites such as New Politics on the war. I find his argument on this aspect quite strong. I quote:

‘As we did explain on numerous occasions, it is wrong to characterize the war in the Ukraine primarily as a “proxy war”. Of course, it is true that such an element exists since it takes place against the background of an accelerating inter-imperialist rivalry where both camps attempt to utilize the war to their advantage.

‘However, this has been the case in nearly all national wars which took place in periods of Great Power rivalry. Just think about France’s support for the U.S. War of Independence against Britain in 1775-83, the support of France and other Western power for the Polish insurrection against Russian occupation in 1863-64, the support of Napoleon III for the Italian Risorgimento, Russia’s support for the Balkan peoples in their war against the Ottoman Empire in 1912, Western and Nazi Germany’s support for Ethiopia against Italy in 1935-36, Western support for China as well as for various partisan struggles in South East Asia as well as in Europe during World War II, etc. Such kind of interference by one or several Great Powers did not remove the legitimate character of such national wars.

‘The comrades’ reference to Serbia and its role in World War I is misplaced. This was a World War with all Great Powers participating so that three-quarters of the world population was affected by this catastrophe. The Entente powers sent armies to the Balkans where the Serbian troops fought as part of their joint command. Today, no Western Power has deployed its troops to wage war against Russia – neither in the Ukraine nor anywhere else. Of course, this could change in the future and, as we have repeatedly said since 24 February, this could change the character of the Ukraine War and, consequently, our tactics. But it would be utterly wrong to define our tactics for today on the basis of possible developments tomorrow.

‘Furthermore, the comrades should take into account that the relationship between Russia and the Ukraine has been historically shaped by national oppression. The Ukrainians fight Putin’s invasion not because Western governments tell them to do so but because they want to keep their fundamental national rights. Surely, Western weapons make their struggle militarily more effective. Without such weapons they would be forced to wage a more “primitive” war with a larger component of guerrilla struggle. But their goals would be pretty much the same as they are currently: defeating the Russian occupiers and liberating the occupied territories.

‘We ask those comrades criticising our analysis: what would the Ukraine do differently without Western support? Would they stop fighting the Russian invaders and rather

welcome them? Would they support Russification, pardon "Denazification"? Would they not [be] trying to liberate their territories? The answers to such questions are obvious!

'We repeat that this does not mean that we deny that there exists a "proxy element" in this conflict. This is why we have always insisted that revolutionaries in both imperialist camps must reject all forms of chauvinist-militarist policy. This includes strong opposition to economic and financial sanctions as well as to all forms of chauvinist hatred against "Russian culture", "Western LGBT decadence", etc.'

https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/global/ukraine-war-once-more-on-military-aid-and-inter-imperialist-rivalry-rsop-dc-srs-ft-lit/#anker_1

I continued:

"I think the 'enhanced forward presence' of NATO, which of course we oppose, is yet another example of how the US and its NATO allies have taken advantage of the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine to bolster their standing and expand their influence in eastern Europe. No surprise there. But surely it is the Kremlin aggression that has given them this advantage. Do you oppose that? As you know, [...] the Zimmerwald socialists were unanimously opposed to annexations. And as I argue in my recent post they defended the self-determination of imperialist Belgium, occupied by Germany and in that respect (as Lenin argued) an oppressed nation. The NATO response, as Pröbsting argues, has not altered the fundamental nature of the Kremlin's war. Its 'enhanced forward presence' does not amount to a direct military intervention in the war, as it clearly recognizes in its relations with Ukraine.

"If we are to cite analogies from WWI, I think the Belgian one is more pertinent and useful than Serbia. But I will leave it at that, for now."

I had discussed the Belgian case in the article cited below in footnote 1, which I was sure my correspondent had read.

He then replied:

"Thanks for pulling together these very fine sources and comments.

"In your comments, I noted in particular:

'I think the "enhanced forward presence" of NATO, which of course we oppose...'

"Opposition to the NATO 'forward presence' seems to me to be a position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict around which a wide range of socialist opinions could unite."

This was clearly an attempt to evade the central issue. So I responded:

"Perhaps. But it must be an accompaniment to the demand for withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and an end to the Kremlin's annexations of Ukrainian territory, the primary issue - the Russian aggression, occupation and annexations providing the Western imperialists with their pretext for renewed NATO expansion in Europe. And

that's the sticking point for many leftists who are unwilling to recognize Russia as an imperial aggressor, its actions a component of the vaunted multipolarity some hail as a progressive response to the US-led imperialist disorder. Our axis in this war must be defense of Ukrainian sovereignty and self-determination, solidarity with the Ukrainian people and their national resistance, both armed and unarmed."

His reply, in its entirety: "Thanks for these thoughts."

This exchange, to me, illustrates the problem described by the Polish comrade I cited at the outset of this post. The war has provoked a wide range of reactions among socialists and progressive-minded people. Many, while they are aware of the dangerous escalation in geopolitical tensions provoked by the Russian aggression, are unwilling or unable to acknowledge the imperialist nature of that regime or to engage with those who defend the justice of Ukraine's fight for its national sovereignty.

Their reticence is understandably motivated, I think, by a reluctance to be seen as aligned somehow with the interests of US imperialism, the main supplier of weaponry to the besieged Ukrainians and, to be sure, the dominant imperialist power in global capitalism. And it leads some, like my correspondent, to search for some means, however contrived, to divert attention away from Ukraine's self-defense to NATO's (and Canada's) interest in exploiting the Kremlin's aggression.

What is at stake, however, are fundamental differences in relation to the changing shape of global geopolitics and the challenge this presents to socialists. We need to bear in mind that our opposition to imperialism – all imperialisms, not just the US and NATO – is based in principle on our support for the fundamental democratic right of national self-determination against all forms of oppression or foreign occupation.

I think this is captured very well by this article, which addresses "the very real messiness" involved in Ukraine's dependence on NATO weaponry in its own anti-imperialist struggle: ["USA: Ukraine Aid and Anti-Imperialism."](#)

Note in particular its conclusion, which I fully support:

"[I]t would be unwise to dismiss the very real messiness of situational (if temporary) alignment with one of the great power blocs. To clarify things, I would suggest using self-determination, a concept which has understandably seen a revival since the invasion, as a guiding principle for the left's approach to aid.

"Appealing to the US may have been Ukraine's only option for defending its sovereignty against Russia, but that should not mean that it becomes yet another client state of the world hegemon. Supporting Ukraine's defense against one empire should mean opposing its exploitation by all of them. Placing self-determination at the center of our analysis can help us determine which aid is necessary and which is opportunistic, a distinction that will be even more important when the war ends and reconstruction begins."

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P.S.

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2023/01/our-key-antiwar-target-kremlin-or-nato.html>

Footnotes

[1] The article was also published in *Links, International Journal of Socialist Renewal* under the more meaningful title "[Supporting Ukraine's right to self-determination: The historical example of 'poor little Belgium'.](#)"