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From Ukraine to Palestine: The Poisons of Denialism

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EXPLODING OVER THE past year, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Israel's escalating violence and ethnic cleansing in Palestine have become two centers of a deepening global crisis. For the international left, the Ukraine war and Palestine catastrophe, both on their own and together, pose very big tests of theory and more importantly, of politics.

A question has bedeviled the left: Is it possible to support both the Ukrainian and Palestinian struggles, and oppose imperialism, at the same time? Actually, the question should be reversed: How is it possible for a genuinely internationalist left *not* to support both of these struggles for self-determination and national survival?

Obviously, the degenerative bloody spiral in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Russia's drive to destroy Ukraine are both international emergencies. Beyond that, the situations are very distinct of course. I will argue, however, that there are also important parallels and connections.

On the face of it, the biggest difference lies in the stance of U.S. imperialism and its allies – giving massive military support to Ukraine's war of defense and applying economic sanctions against Russia, while at the same time, for more than five decades now, enabling the Israeli state's drive to crush the Palestinian people's aspirations for survival and self-determination.

For some of the left, sadly, global struggle revolves *only* around the crimes of U.S. imperialism and its allies — to the point that not only the role of other imperial oppressors, but the agency of real people and oppressed peoples fighting for their own freedom, fades to irrelevance. From that point of view, for the left to simultaneously support both Ukraine *and* the Palestinian struggle seems like a hopeless contradiction.

The hypocrisy of Western rhetoric about the “rules-based international order” and “democracy against authoritarianism” is, of course, overwhelming. But this is neither new nor surprising in the light of centuries of colonial and imperial history.

For those of us striving to be consistent anti-imperialists, the starting point isn't which imperialist camp happens to be stronger or “the main enemy” in some global schema, but rather *the rights of nations and peoples and their legitimate struggles*.

That's why I begin this discussion with a vital parallel between the Ukrainian and Palestinian struggles — the *denial* of Ukrainian nationhood by Vladimir Putin, calling it an artificial creation of the godless Bolsheviks, and the *denial* of Palestinian nationhood by all the Israeli and Zionist movement ideologues who maintain “there was no such thing as Palestinians” (Golda Meir) and “there was never a Palestinian state.”

Ideologies of Denial

Are we equating Ukraine and Palestine? Certainly not – *denialism* is what we're talking about. In each case it's about denial of the right of self-determination. This kind of twisted ideology has consequences, up to and including de-humanization that paves the road to mass murder.

In the case of Palestine, denialism facilitates a myth – absurd on its face and long discredited, but still widely circulated – that the native Palestinian population was mostly comprised of recent arrivals drawn by the prosperity generated by Zionist settlement. Although factually vacuous, it serves as a convenient ideological backstop for the continuing confiscation of Palestinian land and property for the sake of “rebuilding the Jewish homeland.”

This narrative stretches across time and politics from the Labor Zionist Golda Meir to the present Israeli Finance Minister, the extreme religious-nationalist Bezael Smotrich: [“There’s is no such thing as a Palestinian nation. There is no Palestinian history. There is no Palestinian language.”](#)

Rightwing U.S. Christian nationalists pick up the theme: “There’s really no such thing as the Palestinians,” [<href="#mike" >says former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee.](#)

This attempted erasure of the Palestinian people’s reality reached its climax, at least in U.S. circles, with the publication of a screed by Joan Peters (or ghostwritten for her), *From Time Immemorial* (1984). It was debunked *in toto* by Norman Finkelstein, and discredited by scholars including Israeli historian Yehoshua Porath who called it a “sheer forgery,” but as a useful Zionist narrative it has continued to circulate.

Peters’ thesis took a new lease on life when its falsehoods were lifted, without attribution, by Alan Dershowitz for his 2003 book *The Case for Israel*. (Norman Finkelstein returned to the exposure of both Peters and Dershowitz in his 2008 book *Beyond Chutzpah*. Dershowitz denied attempting to pressure University of California Press not to publish Finkelstein’s book. Among other things, in retrospect the affair illustrates some aspects of Dershowitz’s character that ultimately drew him to Donald Trump.)

For many liberal (Jewish and other) friends of Israel, the brutality of the Occupation when it’s impossible to ignore becomes a cause of alarm and handwringing, but the idea that Palestinians are something less than a “real” nation serves as a partial anesthetic. They can rationalize the “violence on both sides” as the result of Palestinians’ unreasonable “rejectionism” (i.e. refusal to accept the theft of 80 percent of their homeland).

It also has debilitating consequences for Israeli politics, as we’ll see below.

In the Ukraine war, Putin’s claim that Ukraine is naturally part of “the Russian heartland” is historically ridiculous, but since it’s promoted by powerful state propaganda doesn’t need to be backed up by facts. The myth puts a gloss on Moscow’s annexationist claims on the provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, as well as Crimea.

In his July 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin wrote regarding the “time bomb” planted in the Soviet Union at its founding:

“The right for the republics to freely secede from the Union was included in the text of the Declaration on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and, subsequently, in the 1924 USSR Constitution. By doing so, the authors planted in the foundation of our statehood the most dangerous time bomb, which exploded the moment the safety mechanism provided by the leading role of the CPSU was gone, the party itself collapsing from within.”

Back in April 2008 at a NATO summit in Bucharest, [Putin reportedly claimed:](#) “Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? A part of its territory is [in] Eastern Europe, but part, a considerable part, was a gift from us!”

The noted scholar of European history, Donald J. Trump, was reported to have exclaimed in an August 2017 briefing that Ukraine “wasn’t a ‘real country,’ that it had always been part of Russia.” (*Washington Post*, November 2, 2019,

“A presidential loathing for Ukraine is at the heart of the impeachment inquiry”)

Denial of Ukraine’s nationhood helps enable the most ignorant and dishonest sectors of the global left to label Ukrainian nationalism as led by “Nazis” worthy of extermination, while more pacifist-oriented elements regard Ukraine’s territory as bargaining chips to be negotiated in order to stop the carnage.

If Ukraine is regarded as an artificial construct — regardless of what Ukrainians may think — how much then should it really matter if Donetsk is part of Ukraine, or Russia, or semi-independent? Thus we see, for example, how CodePink and allied groups calling for “peace” systematically refuse to answer the simple question, “Is Ukraine a ‘real country’ and does it have the right to defend itself?”

This refusal makes it more comfortable for pacifists who sympathize with Ukrainians’ suffering, but don’t understand the popular depth of Ukraine’s resistance, to plead for “peace negotiations” that would amount to Ukraine’s territorial amputation. They also seem blind to the reality that such a “peace” would lead to massive re-arming on all sides for a next, bloodier round.

The issue here isn’t what terms the Ukrainian people might decide to negotiate – which is their right, and theirs alone – but the political and moral bankruptcy of “peace” advocates lecturing them about the need to surrender.

Whether or not western imperialist powers, which we know are infinitely treacherous, will ultimately move to impose some “solution” in the name of “realism,” remains an open question. For the left, that shouldn’t affect a principled defense of Ukrainians’ right to determine their own future.

The Main Differences

The parallel denials of Palestinian and Ukrainian nationhood and rights to self-determination don’t mean that these struggles themselves are identical. Obviously, Ukraine is not Palestine – and much less is it Israel, as Ukraine’s president Zelensky claimed when he was hoping to get more support from that quarter:

“In 2020, Zelensky took Ukraine out of the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and, in a speech to the Knesset, he linked the existential right of the Ukrainian nation to that of the Israeli nation, both fighting an enemy bent on the ‘total destruction of the people, state, culture.’ In a passionate response, the Palestinian university of Haifa professor Asad Ghanem accused Zelensky of reversing the role of occupier and occupied. While expressing Palestinian support for the Ukrainian people’s resistance to the brutal Russian invasion, he said that Zelensky’s words were a ‘disgrace when it comes to global struggles for freedom and liberation.’” (Liz Fekete, [Civilisational racism, ethnonationalism and the clash of imperialisms in Ukraine.](#) *Race & Class.*

Geopolitical pundits can explain all the differences between the war in Ukraine and the so-called Palestine-Israeli “conflict.” At their core, however, the differences between these modern states and nations are clear enough. Please note: we say “modern” states and nations, because we are not speaking here of wars of European kingdoms and state borders from past centuries, let alone the medieval Kievan Rus or the myth-encrusted history of ancient Israel. All of these are of interest, but belong to separate discussions.

The main difference between Ukraine and Israel is that *the modern Ukrainian state was not founded on the dispossession and the land of another people*, whom it expelled *en masse* and proceeded to impose a brutal occupation regime with colonial and apartheid-like features.

On the other hand, the big difference between Ukraine and Palestine is that Ukraine *is* a nation-state with the well-demonstrated capacity to defend its territory against an imperial invader. Being in the middle of Europe has also enabled it to get necessary military assistance. Palestinians do not have state institutions, or an army, or any strategic military option to win their freedom.

More than that, Palestinians have no great-power friends, and U.S. imperialism in particular is entirely indifferent to their fate as long as things stay relatively “quiet” (i.e. invisible). In fact, Palestine is essentially collateral damage in every international crisis, including the present war in Ukraine.

The Palestinian people attract a great deal of important global popular solidarity, but no support from “geopolitical” actors in the region or anywhere else. They are an essentially unarmed population confronting, on their own, the enormous power of the Israeli colonial state.

For its own reasons, of course, U.S. imperialism assists Ukraine’s war while simultaneously enabling Israel’s crushing of Palestine. That’s an illustration of cynical great-power policy, but no reason for the left to simply turn that policy inside out. The widely acclaimed heroism of the Ukrainian people, and the generally unrecognized heroism of the Palestinian people, are equally deserving of solidarity from those of us who oppose *all* imperialism and colonialism. That’s all the more important now.

Reactionary Feedback

A further parallel is that the invasion of Ukraine and the disaster in Palestine cannot be separated from the internal political crises in Russia and Israel respectively. In each case, the regimes’ efforts to crush another nation feed directly back into their own societies.

Too many liberal “friends of Israel” can’t grasp the reality that the Jewish-supremacist amalgam of rightwing nationalism and religious extremism in the new Israeli governing coalition represents the authentic destination toward which political Zionism has been heading for a very long time.

One can have a long and complex discussion over whether a different destination was possible – if the post-1967 Occupation had been quickly ended – but that possibility is long dead, along with the zombie “two-state solution.”

While Israeli military and settler murders are a daily reality in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, at the same time an unprecedented confrontation has exploded in Israeli politics over the government’s peremptory move to seize control over the nomination and powers of the country’s judiciary. Israeli state president Herzog’s warning of “civil war” shows the extent of the crisis.

The “reform” threat has brought hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens (almost entirely Jewish) into the streets, blockading highways and ports, openly calling the government scheme “fascist.” They see the fight as a life-and-death struggle to save Israel’s democracy. With capital fleeing the country, [Amjad Iraqi of the Israeli online +972 magazine](#) calls the spreading revolt, ironically, “one of the most impressive BDS campaigns ever witnessed.”

Democracy does exist, for Israel’s Jewish citizens; to a much more limited degree for the country’s Arab citizens; and not at all for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories who live under military-apartheid conditions. A movement for Israeli democracy is inevitably strangled so long as the denial of Palestinian nationhood remains in place either openly or by default.

For prime minister Netanyahu, judicial “reform” means exempting himself from criminal prosecution on multiple corruption charges. Netanyahu is effectively a captive of his religious-extremist coalition partners, for whom it’s about seizing control of “Jewish identity” issues and removing any (weak) restraints on murderous military and settler assaults on Palestinian towns, unlimited settlement expansion, and power to ban Arab-led parties from future elections (as parliamentary electoral commissions have previously attempted but been overruled by Israel’s Supreme Court).

Palestinian and progressive critics have accurately pointed out that the fight to “save Israel’s democracy” is essentially over maintaining a *status quo* that’s already lethally anti-democratic for Palestinians. Given such limitations, its prospects for substantive success are clouded — although the prospect of weakening judicial authority is causing serious capital flight, while Israel’s supreme protector, the United States government, now seems seriously concerned by the implications of Religious Zionist cabinet ministers’ overtly genocidal appeals. Both these factors are bad for business and “stability.”

One interesting comparison between Israel and Russia has been the public indifference of most of their populations — in the Israeli-Jewish case, to the disaster unfolding in the Occupied Territories, and in Russia’s case to the horror in Ukraine.

For many years now, most of the Israeli-Jewish public has been conditioned to ignore the facts of the Occupation, even when they’re freely available. In Russia, state media and police repression keep the war’s brutality hidden. The degree of freedom inside Israel makes possible a civic arousal, while inside Russia the invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by the disappearance of the remaining vestiges of democracy.

The Putin regime is now the global mothership of white Christian Nationalism, for which it is so admired by much of the MAGA faction of the U.S. Republican Party. As is widely discussed, Russia is moving increasingly toward some form of fascism, a trend which is only likely to accelerate unless its invasion is defeated. (We’ve discussed this trend in Zakhar Popovych’s recent article [“Russia’s Road Toward Fascism?”](#))

As for the impasse of Russian society itself, it’s deepened by the catastrophe of Putin’s war of choice. As sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky writes:

“The year that has passed since the beginning of the war has clearly shown that the political system needs a radical change. An alternative to reforms can only be the growing disintegration of state institutions and the degradation of an already sick economy, which does not suit anyone. But the only way to change course is to remove Vladimir Putin from power.” ([On the First Anniversary of the War.](#))

Prospects

Indeed, any prospects of a democratic future for Russia are inseparably connected to the outcome of the war — in particular, they depend on the *defeat* of its imperialist, annexationist ambitions in Ukraine. Ukrainian democracy is equally dependent on the war’s results — but in its case, on the *victory* of its resistance to the invasion. And the outcomes of these events will have ripple effects for all of us.

While Ukrainian labor and left forces are fully engaged in the war, they are also forced to resist the Zelensky government’s anti-worker policies. A Ukrainian victory would open the *possibility* (there are no guarantees) of permanently overcoming the cycle of oligarchic factional politics that dominated the country following its 1991

post-Soviet independence. On the other hand, a tragic defeat or amputation of Ukraine is more likely to shatter its emergent national unity — and bring on a resurgence of far-right forces.

For Israel, preservation of its *formal* democracy depends on its *substantive* expansion. That means first of all, a movement that confronts the reduction of Arab citizens' rights — and apartheid-colonial rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories — in law and practice. This requires nothing short of a political revolution to shatter the doctrine of the “nation-state of the Jewish people” that the current governing coalition is guiding toward its ultimate unspeakable conclusions.

As under any other ethno-religious regime, Jewish supremacy and democracy will not peacefully coexist. The violent settlers who carried out the pogrom in Huwara, and commit daily atrocities that don't make the international headlines, understand this perfectly. No doubt they will rush to join the “national guard” that Netanyahu has gifted to the extreme racist cabinet member Itamar Bem-Gvir.

The question for Israeli society is whether it can confront the consequences of the Zionist movement's denial, from its very inception, of the Palestinian nation. That struggle requires assistance from the outside, through the BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) and other actions of solidarity for Palestinian rights.

At the same time, Russian denialism of Ukrainian nationhood can only be defeated on the battlefield, and that requires international solidarity, including weapons, with Ukraine's war for survival. Russia and NATO may be waging an element of a “proxy war” — which thanks to Putin, NATO is winning — but what's of decisive importance is that Ukraine is fighting a *people's war* that every left force should support.

Contrary to Biden's shambling rhetoric, the issues in this war aren't about global states standing for “democracy versus authoritarianism.” That's a struggle that exists not between states but *within* every society, including (especially) our own. Let alone is it about the pious fraud of a “rules-based international order,” where the United States makes the rules and gives the orders.

The left must not be diverted: First and foremost in Ukraine and Palestine, the struggle is about the rights of peoples and nations, and the poisonous consequences when those rights are denied.

On the unfolding Palestine/Israel crisis, I highly recommend the Israeli online magazine +972. See the [Ukraine Solidarity Network](#) for its mission statement and many useful references.

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