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War in Ukraine

# Making sense of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

- Features -

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**A momentous development has drawn my attention away from the unfolding climate catastrophe on which I have been riveted. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a major factor fragmenting the left-wing forces I hoped would become a major force in the revolutionary struggle for climate justice and human survival. Recently, I have met Russians and Ukrainians — and others from Brazil, Argentina and the United States — who have all made it clear to me that I cannot avoid dealing with this issue. [\[1\]](#)**

In this article, I will attempt to do three things:

- Review what some on the left assert either in favour of Russia's invasion of Ukraine or against the Ukrainian response;<
- Review Russian and Ukrainian realities and views on the war; and
- Touch on essential aspects of Ukrainian resistance to Russia's invasion (including where the weapons come from).

In the footnotes I offer sources that have influenced my analysis and that I believe may be useful for those seeking to make sense of these realities. But I owe it to readers to indicate my own position from the outset. This is my bottom-line:

- I favour the defeat of Vladimir Putin's invasion and victory for Ukrainian self-determination.
- I oppose imperialism in all its forms – including Putin's invasion and NATO.
- I oppose capitalism and favour its replacement with the genuine political and economic democracy of socialism everywhere: the United States, Ukraine, Russia etc.

## **What mistaken friends say — and where they are right**

Some people on the left, for whom I have affection and respect, articulate what appears to be a very clear position rooted in time-tested formulas. What they say goes something like this: We must oppose the horrors of war — and the primary purveyor of those horrors is imperialism, most of all the greatest representative of imperialism on our planet: US multinational corporations and the government they dominate. That government reaches for world domination through a policy of “foreign aid” to puppet governments, proxy wars, subversive activities, direct military interventions and the threat of nuclear annihilation. These imperialist policymakers advance alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since its founding, NATO has been employed to advance imperialist interests at the expense of the Soviet Union and then Russia, after the Soviet Union's collapse. US imperialism is responsible for the invasion of Ukraine, which was launched to defend Russia's security in the face of these threats.

Some of these friends go on to say that they do not favour Putin's invasion of Ukraine, that it was a terrible mistake

and should be opposed. However, they also do not favour Ukrainians opposing it with weapons. Instead, there should be negotiations.

It might be argued that negotiations under these circumstances (military invasion without Ukrainian resistance) would result in Putin's government pretty much getting what it wants. For some friends, that is OK. This is because, in their opinion: (a) the Ukrainian government is more or less a cover for US imperialism; (b) the so-called Ukrainian "resistance" is infested with fascist-minded nationalists and murderous neo-Nazis; and (c) Ukraine is historically part of Russia, not a legitimate sovereign nation.

Not all the friends I am referring to hold all positions outlined above. But all agree on something that I also believe is absolutely correct: the centrality of imperialism to world politics and the need for those who believe in socialism and democracy — rule by the people over our economic and political life — to oppose it.

## Imperialism and illusion

US imperialism is a reality in our world. This has been so at least since the 1890s, although it could be argued that this has been the case since the 1790s. (By *imperialism*, I am referring to military and/or political and/or economic expansion beyond the borders of one's own country for the purpose of ensuring the well-being of one's economy, including the need to secure markets, raw materials and investment opportunities.) Too many people in the United States — including some on the left — seem unclear about this reality, but we can neither understand our history nor the world around us without keeping this clearly in focus. [2]

If that is all we see, however, then we are missing significant realities. I am particularly influenced in my understanding of imperialism by the works (partly complementary, partly divergent) of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Neither saw imperialism as representing a single evil country, but rather all countries in our epoch — oppressed by competing and contending elites of "Great Powers" — and reflecting the capitalist dynamics of the global economy. Both Lenin and Luxemburg saw imperialism as operating in various ways, depending on the specifics of each country, and very much including both the US and Russia. So it is today. [3]

How this plays out in regard to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict involves multiple components. One of the key instruments of US foreign policy — and what many of us would characterise as a key imperialist instrument — is NATO. It is a military alliance designed in 1949 to contain and push back the threat to capitalist interests represented by the Soviet Union and possible revolutionary insurgencies. Yet another instrument of capitalist expansion and stability has been the European Union (EU).

Both NATO and the EU figure into a shrewd analysis developed by political scientist John Mearsheimer, an influential critic of recent US foreign policy. He asserts that "with the passage of time ... we [US policymakers] have moved forward to include Ukraine in the West to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border". He added that "this includes more than just NATO expansion. NATO expansion is the heart of the strategy, but it includes EU expansion as well, and it includes turning Ukraine into a pro-American liberal democracy, and, from a Russian perspective, this is an existential threat." [4] This identifies important (although not all) aspects of reality.

Mearsheimer notes that the US power elite has sometimes found itself in a similar situation and "overthrew democratically elected leaders in the Western hemisphere during the Cold War because we were unhappy with their policies. This is the way great powers behave." (Of course, "we" are not all part of the power elite — but that is another matter.) More than once, Mearsheimer rejects the label *imperialism*, preferring the term "great power politics", but for some of us this amounts to essentially the same thing. In any event, he suggests that Putin is in

favour of Russia “taking at least the Donbass [Donets Coal Basin], and maybe some more territory and eastern Ukraine, and, number two, he wants to install in Kyiv a pro-Russian government, a government that is attuned to Moscow's interests.”

Mearsheimer makes no claims to being any kind of Marxist or socialist. He avoids reference to class divisions and class conflict within countries, blurring all classes together with the governments of their specific countries. He also fully accepts the right of “great powers” to insist on having their way: “In an ideal world, it would be wonderful if the Ukrainians were free to choose their own political system and to choose their own foreign policy,” he comments. “But in the real world, that is not feasible. The Ukrainians have a vested interest in paying serious attention to what the Russians want from them. They run a grave risk if they alienate the Russians in a fundamental way.”

Peace activists Medea Benjamin and Nicholas J.S. Davies represent an orientation and value system that is different from Mearsheimer's. In their substantial effort to make sense of the Russian-Ukraine conflict, however, they repeat a judgement by Noam Chomsky consistent with Mearsheimer's conclusions — that the conflict involves “criminality and stupidity on the Kremlin side, severe provocation on the U.S. side.” There is considerable validity to this judgement. Benjamin and Davies go on to pose these questions: “Could Putin really believe that Russia's very existence was under such immediate threat that invasion was the only answer? Could Western leaders really believe that Ukraine's right to join NATO and to reimpose its sovereignty over Donbas and Crimea were causes worthy of jeopardizing millions of lives or risking nuclear war?” They conclude:

Westerners supporting endless shipments of weapons to Ukraine sincerely hoped to defend Ukrainian freedom and sovereignty. But calling on Ukrainians to keep fighting until they won a total victory over Russia and reclaimed Crimea and the Donbas could only lead to massive Ukrainian death and suffering, and a dangerous proxy war between nuclear superpowers that threatened the lives of everyone on Earth. [5]

Benjamin and Davies offer no blueprint for peace, but the implications of what they say seems to call for a negotiated compromise between the nuclear superpowers, consistent with the “great power” analysis offered by Mearsheimer. Yet their analysis, I think, contains three illusions:

- First, like Mearsheimer, they equate the Putin regime with *Russia* as a whole — but I think this is a terrible illusion.
- Second, they assume (in apparent contrast to Mearsheimer) that Putin exaggerates the threat posed to his regime — but I think his fear is well-founded. [6]
- Finally, they appear to believe that Ukrainians keep fighting against the invasion because “we” are calling on them to do that — but I think the Ukrainians' commitment to keep fighting is not the result of anyone egging them on. It comes naturally.

In addition to such illusions, some might argue that there are dubious ethical judgements entwined in their analysis. One is that “we” (or the power elites of Russia and the US) have the right to decide (or negotiate) what will and will not happen to millions of others who live in foreign lands. Consistent partisans of actual democracy (not to be confused with pseudo-democratic rhetoric) would disagree. They would insist that people have the right to shape their own future — which implies the right to struggle for self-determination. These matters are explored below.

## Which side are you on?

I should clarify something. When I refer to friends in this article, I am speaking of those on the left who favour the meaning of the old slogan “Power to the People”: economic and political democracy, a classless society with liberty and justice for all, and a society of the free and the equal. Putin is not one of these friends. He is a self-avowed enemy of the left. His reference points are not Karl Marx or Luxemburg or Lenin. He has long been prominently associated with the All-Russian Political Party, popularly known as United Russia, which identifies as conservative. Nor is he sympathetic to the ideals of democrats such as Tom Paine, Abraham Lincoln or Frederick Douglass. Although he has sought to maintain a democratic veneer for his rule through what has been dubbed “managed democracy,” there is nothing like “rule by the people” in the way his regime functions. [7] Putin is openly and thoroughly anti-Communist, and explicitly adheres to the ideologies and philosophies of extreme, authoritarian conservatives prominent in tsarist Russia. [8]

Their ideals were: Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality. By “Orthodoxy” such ideologists referred to the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church. By “Autocracy” they referred to a despotic regime that does not tolerate challenges to its authority and makes use of brutally violent Cossacks and other repressive forces to intimidate critics and crush all serious dissent. By “Nationality” they referred to the aggressive domination of a vast empire (dissenters dubbed it “a prisonhouse of nations”) in which all ethnic groups were to abandon their distinctive cultures and languages, adopting instead those of a unified Great Russia.

Analysts have pointed to the influence on Putin's thinking and policies of various extreme right-wing theorists, such as Vladislav Surkov and Alexander Dugin, and the long-dead reactionary Ivan Ilyin. Their extreme nationalism seems to bend toward a Russian version of fascism. Others have argued this is overstated. But there is no denying that Putin's political thinking and policies are very much on the right of the political spectrum. It is also clear — when one considers Putin's elaborate explanations for the invasion of Ukraine — that a key factor for him is not simply defending Russia from possible NATO incursions (the thrust of shorter explanations) but rather what Lenin would have referred to as “Great Russian chauvinism”; namely, his belief that Ukraine is historically inseparable from Russia. [9]

Many people, including some on the left, seem unclear about this reality, sometimes blurring Putin's regime with the self-described left-wing regimes of the Soviet era. Putin has never pretended to head a left-wing regime. He is part of a right-wing authoritarian trend, often with a populist veneer, that has become common in today's world. Regarding Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russian socialist Ilya Butraitskis warns: “A victory for Putin would strengthen other reactionaries like Trump and the far right as a whole.” [10]

There is another point that we must be clear on: the pervasiveness of capitalism in world politics. Capitalism certainly dominates the US, but it also dominates the world. The end of the Cold War and the triumph of “globalisation” has made this more true than ever. And in many ways, it is inseparable from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a similar variant of capitalism became dominant in both Russia and Ukraine. The economy of both has been privatised, giving rise to domination by self-interested economic oligarchs. This is combined with breath-taking corruption and soaring inequality, at the expense of the great majority of Russians and Ukrainians. [11]

Capitalism assumes different forms in different times and places. The hybrid tsarist capitalism in the Russia of 1914, for example, was not the same as the modern industrial capitalism in the US during the same period. For that matter, differences can be found between the form of post-Soviet oligarchic capitalism in Russia and in Ukraine. Both were initially governed by prominent ex-Communist Party functionaries — Boris Yeltsin (Russia) and Leonid Kravchuk (Ukraine) — who embraced capitalism and worked intimately with new layers of capitalist oligarchs. Both found themselves challenged, in their inegalitarian and corrupt policies of capitalist transition, by semi-democratic

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parliaments established in the wake of Communism's collapse. With support from the army, Yeltsin rode roughshod over Russia's parliament, finally physically assaulting it and ordering its dissolution. He pushed through a new constitution that created an authoritarian executive branch of government to enable him to rule by decree. Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokyh notes that Yeltsin paved the way for "Russia's road to autocracy." In the Ukraine, on the other hand, "Kravchuk never wrested from parliament the right to rule by decree." [12]

Kravchuk was the first president of an independent Ukraine, but was shunted aside in a jumble of competing power-players. A major political divide soon developed over whether Ukraine should be more closely aligned with Russia or with Western Europe and the US. Through the 2014 mass mobilisations in Kyiv's central square (Maidan) — the so-called "Euromaidan Revolution" — Ukraine's political-economic alignment shifted decisively to "the West". But all fractions of the political elite have been committed to Ukraine's transition to the market economy. As analyst Renfrey Clarke has noted:

For Ukraine, the return of capitalism has been a disaster. The country's economic and political elites have seized on the opportunities for self-enrichment furnished by private property and the market, creating a system that is both dysfunctional and at the same time extraordinarily resistant to change. Nor has the fiasco been turned around by the "Euromaidan Revolution", whose fifth anniversary Ukrainians celebrated — with varying degrees of enthusiasm — in February 2019. [13]

In Russia too, Yeltsin's regime spelled disaster for the Russian people. Yet the authoritarian measures he implemented in the early 1990s provided political tools for his more capable successor who took over in 2000. "Putin and his collaborators pulled the Russian state out of the chaos of the 1990s and centralized it," notes historian Simon Pirani. "They moved against the Yeltsin-era oligarchs in the interests of the property-owning class as a whole." [14] Despite a partially veiled but soaring inequality, living standards for masses of Russians thereby improved. To maintain the system's stability, Putin's ideological and political orientation pulled in an increasingly authoritarian direction.

Ukrainian socialist Yuliya Yurchenko shares a different story regarding Ukrainian capitalism. Referring to Ukrainian politics as dominated by an "authoritarian neoliberal kleptocracy", what she describes seems similar to what existed in Yeltsin's Russia, before Putin took control. She notes:

The combination of ill-prescribed market transition reforms, loaned funds mismanagement and misappropriation by the kleptocratic ruling bloc have resulted in a toxic debt dependency that has become a tool for manipulation in the renewed geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the USA/EU. [15]

Yurchenko insists that we cannot understand what is happening unless we place events within the framework of "the most resilient empire in modern history [which] has not fallen with the fading of the European empires but has grown stronger — the empire of (transnationalising) capital." She adds: "Where empires spread, blood is shed. Blood has been shed continuously across the globe in the name of struggles for further accumulation of capital." [16]

The details and specifics of Russia's invasion of Ukraine go beyond the framework of this short essay. [17] Just as "who was the aggressor" was beside the point when World War I exploded in 1914, so "which side should we support" can be a misleading question in regard to the Russian-Ukrainian War — *that is, if we restrict our attention to governments that deserve no support from revolutionaries.*

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Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky — like Putin — is not one of us. He is not on our side, and is not on the side of the working people of Ukraine or anywhere else. The assessment of Social Movement activist Vladyslav Starodubtsev is shared by many Ukrainian socialists:

Even before the war, this has been one of the most popular governments Ukraine has had — which is not saying anything good about it, it was just not as awful as the previous ones. Zelensky's party, Servant of the People, has become the most progressive party in parliament on social issues such as LGBTQ rights, opposing violence against women, and so on. But most of these policies have been promoted with European integration in mind, and not because the party is itself progressive.

On the economic front, Zelensky's party is absolutely neoliberal; it has a market fundamentalist orientation. And this war has provided it with the opportunity of a lifetime to push through every unpopular legislation they have ever dreamed of. The war has given them carte blanche to do whatever they want. For example, they have adopted completely neoliberal legislation to deregulate labour relations, which has weakened the power of collective labour contracts and trade unions. Due to their market fundamentalist outlook, they view trade unions and any form of economic democracy as harmful to economic development and see a need to destroy unions. [\[18\]](#)

Social Movement chairperson Vitaliy Dudin makes an interesting link: "A lot of Ukrainian workers are joining the army. We should arm them, so that they can return to their homes alive and be empowered to continue the class war against greedy oligarchs." Nataliya Levytska, of the Mineworkers Union and the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine, explains: "Prior to the invasion, Ukrainian trade unions fought for wage increases and better working conditions and demanded the implementation of international labour standards. We confronted several attempts to undermine workers' and union rights. Thanks to campaigns, protest actions and negotiations with the government, we stopped those attacks." [\[19\]](#)

Ukrainian socialist Hanna Perekhoda also links resistance against the Russian invasion with resistance to the conservative neoliberalism of the Zelensky regime: "As Ukrainian socialists, we are demanding all the military, financial, and diplomatic aid we need to win. At the same time, we are organizing against our own government's attempt to dismantle labor laws and push through neoliberal reforms." Attention is given to what comes after the war: "We are also working to make sure that postwar reconstruction serves the interests of workers and oppressed peoples, not the corporations, oligarchs, and international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. As part of that, we are calling for the cancellation of Ukraine's odious debt." She concludes: "The needs of ordinary Ukrainians, who keep everything from hospitals to schools functioning and are fighting on the frontlines, must be at the center of reconstruction. The liberated country must meet the demands of the vast majority for justice, democracy, and equality." [\[20\]](#)

There are other issues that must be considered. Fascists and neo-Nazis are brutally inserting themselves into this conflict. This is, in fact, a global phenomenon. Open neo-Nazis are visible, but also (at present) relatively marginal among Ukrainians and Russians alike. Yet it can be argued that there are more numerous authoritarian and extreme nationalist influences among combatants, supporters and even some government officials, bearing a resemblance to fascist movements of the past. The Russian-Ukraine conflict is likely to strengthen such fascist elements in both countries. "Both sides accuse the other side of being fascist, but I think that neither side is fascist," notes Russian dissident Boris Kagarlitsky. "That said, the ideology of the far right, and the tendencies that are typical of right-wing populism, and even fascism, are present in both countries." [\[21\]](#)

However, what is especially pronounced in Russia is an incredibly deep feeling and pride among very broad layers of



the population about the Soviet Union's central role in fighting against and defeating the Nazi onslaught during World War II. "We have," Putin noted in a 2012 speech, "an immense moral right: to defend our positions in a fundamental and lasting way. Because our country was the one subjected to the bulk of the Nazi offensive ... and it was our country that offered freedom to the peoples of the whole world." There is a keen sense of the horrific sacrifices (more than 20 million dead out of a population of 200 million) during the Great Patriotic War. This plays a central role in government discussions of, and efforts to rally popular support for, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. That parallel has not, however, gained universal acceptance within Russia — and among a significant number of Russians there has been open opposition to the war. The result has been fierce government repression, which some dissident Russians suggest has itself become a sort of fascism. More than this, however, there has also been a significant growth of far-right organisations and currents in Russia, closely allied with the Putin regime and its war in Ukraine. [22]

While not as severe as in Russia, Ukraine's Zelensky government also employs repression against opponents of the war. This includes Yuri Sheliashenko, Executive Secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement. His organisation adopted a statement that said:

Peace, not war, is the norm of human life. War is an organized mass murder. Our sacred duty is that we shall not kill. ... Condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine, the UN General Assembly called for an immediate peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and emphasized that parties to the conflict must respect human rights and international humanitarian law. We share this position. ... It is wrong to take the side of any of the warring armies, it is necessary to stand on the side of peace and justice. Self-defense can and should be carried out by non-violent and unarmed methods.

This statement resulted in Sheliashenko being placed under house arrest from August 15 to October 11, 2023, under the absurd charge of "justification of Russian aggression." [23]

## Views of Russian and Ukrainian socialists

There are additional matters to consider, and some to revisit, from the standpoint of Russian and Ukrainian socialists. One matter involves how comrades understand the causes of the conflict. A second involves perceptions of the impact of the Russian invasion. A third involves the question of Ukrainian self-determination and where Ukrainian arms come from. I will take up this third matter in the next (and final) section of this document. Here I will simply allow Russian and Ukrainian comrades to speak for themselves.

In analysing the causes of the conflict, Perekhoda goes back to the historical origins of Russia itself. She cites an old expression, "Russia did not have an empire, it was an empire," to indicate that Russia was composed of a series of conquered areas (or colonies) that "were neither geographically nor politically separated from the imperial core". This meant that "borders, both physical and symbolic, were therefore blurred". Ukraine, for example, was seen as an integral and essential component of Russia. At the same time, "both the tsarist and Soviet authorities, after their Stalinist turn, suppressed any manifestation of a separate Ukrainian political identity." [24] This naturally spilled over into tendencies to suppress distinctively Ukrainian language and culture.

Perekhoda goes on to suggest that developments in an independent Ukraine pose a destabilising threat to the Putin regime's control of Russian society. To the extent that Ukraine is more free, democratic and prosperous than Russia, this threatens to "awaken some dangerous ideas among Russians themselves, who are ... tired of the autocratic regime and of the extreme inequality in Russia". [25] Russian poet Kirill Medvedev of the Russian Socialist



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Movement agrees: "In 2021, Putin's rating reached the lowest level it had during his entire time in power." Medvedev sees the "act of imperialist aggression by the Putin regime against Ukraine" as an effort "to strengthen his regime in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election in order to be re-elected or to be able to appoint a reliable successor". [26]

This dovetails with the discussion of the conflict's causes by Kagarlitsky. He identifies two reasons for the war: "the first one basically global and long-term", involving the economic crises of world capitalism — particularly "the Great Recession" of 2007-8 — which "revealed the tremendous weakness of the Russian economy," detrimental to the well-being of most Russians but which benefited Russian oligarchs. Second, "people see that and see that the material situation of the great majority is getting dramatically worse, that real income is declining and prices are rising, that they are having problems getting decent jobs. All this generates tremendous discontent." [27]

Another Russian socialist, Ilya Budraitskis, emphasises this aspect of the war: the need of the regime "to strengthen its power over its own population", making it "not just a war against Ukraine. It's a war of the Russian regime against its own society". Budraitskis elaborates:

Since the start of the war, Putin has crushed all opposition in Russia and driven it underground and abroad. He's been successful in creating an atmosphere of fear and obedience. But only 20 percent of the population support the war enthusiastically, while about 20 percent oppose the war. The latter is, of course, repressed. Most of the rest of the society is passive and depoliticized, tolerating the status quo. Nevertheless, as Prigozhin's attempted coup proved, Putin's regime is fragile. Any serious defeat in the war could destabilize his rule and open space for social change within Russia. [28]

Ukrainian socialists vividly describe the devastating impact of the Russian invasion on their country and their people. "The Ukrainian trade union movement united about six million workers," notes Levytska, "but now, due to the war, this number has decreased because Russia has destroyed enterprises and infrastructure, resulting in the loss of workplaces." She adds: "Russia has also destroyed residential buildings and hospitals and imposed a reign of terror in the occupied territories, forcing people to flee and become refugees." [29]

Starodubtsev bitterly elaborates on conditions in the areas under Russian occupation:

The situation in the occupied regions is one of occupation — it is a fascist occupation. This means repression, mass killings, holding the families of political activists hostage, repression against the LGBTIQ+ community. It is a terror state where anyone who carries out political activity is brutally repressed. A lot of trade unions have been destroyed or forced to accept new labour contracts that are much worse than Ukrainian labour contracts, and all strikes are banned. A lot of ordinary people just went missing: they left home and never returned. There is also a lot of open looting and rapes carried out by Russian forces. The conditions are very dire.

In the occupied territories, Russian authorities have been pushing radical policies of assimilation. They have practically banned the use of the Ukrainian language and enforced the Russian language everywhere, including in schools and public administration. From September 1 [2022], when the school semester starts, the Ukrainian language will no longer be taught at any school in the occupied regions: no studying Ukrainian, no Ukrainian literature, not even within the subject of foreign literature. Russian authorities are inviting people, such as teachers and political commissars, from Russia to come to the occupied regions and take over

positions in the education system and public administration. [\[30\]](#)

“Russia’s imperial ambitions were reinvigorated with the fall of the Soviet Union,” comments Yurchenko. “We can see this in Putin’s speeches where he refers to Ukraine as little more than a province of Russia — one without its own political subjectivity, its own culture, its own language.” Kagarlitsky notes that “Russian propaganda continuously states that Ukraine shouldn’t exist, that Ukrainian territory is actually Russian territory that has been conquered by Ukrainians. It says Russia is going to liberate these territories from the population that lives there; that they are not the right population for that territory.” He adds: “All sorts of racist, fascist statements are made on state channels. It’s an absolutely incredible flood of aggression, xenophobia and hatred.” Another Russian socialist, Ilya Matveev, comments: “The Russian government has never indicated that it is ready to stop this war. In fact, there are indications that it still holds on to its maximalist goal of conquering all of Ukraine, including Kyiv. I don’t see any evidence that they have abandoned those goals. In that sense, a ceasefire would just play into Russian hands and prolong the war.” [\[31\]](#)

There seems to be general agreement among Ukrainian and Russian socialists that the very survival of Ukraine is at stake. “Russia’s invasion has created a major threat to the existence of Ukraine as an independent state,” according to Dudin. “Without doubt, we can say that the current war is the most devastating war we have seen [in Ukraine] since World War II. Putin’s government has a lot of resources, but Ukrainian people are willing and ready to resist.” This struggle for survival is naturally linked to the question of armaments. “The future of demilitarisation lies in stopping Russia’s war machine now,” Dudin asserts. “Issues of security should be of strong concern. Any demilitarisation that ignores the security of the people, their right to defend themselves, and justifies blocking resistance against imperialist aggression is morally wrong.” [\[32\]](#)

Perekhoda emphasises that “for Ukraine, this is a war of self-defence. And I think it’s very important to make a difference between, you know, the use of violence with the aim of aggression and the use of violence with the aim to protect your own existence.” This means “the question of weapons is essential to us because it’s the question of our survival as a society and of our political, economic sovereignty”. Medvedev suggests that the Putin regime’s denunciation of Ukraine for getting weapons from the US and Western Europe seems questionable since “Russia has also been buying weapons from the West for years”. More than this, he notes, “Ukraine, as a country subject to intervention, has every right to receive military aid from anyone — just like the Kurds, and just like Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s”. [\[33\]](#)

## Lessons from history on self-determination

Not all Marxist-oriented socialists are inclined to accept Putin’s analysis. [\[34\]](#) Nor is the analysis of the Russia-Ukrainian conflict presented here embraced by all who identify as revolutionary Marxists. In fact, considerable time, space and energy have been devoted to fierce denunciations and counter-denunciations on this question. Much of this does not strike me as having been fruitful. My hope is that we can move forward in a manner that helps to unite rather than fragment our movement, through frank and comradely discussion.

The approach I advance here is not original. It is grounded in the orientation that Lenin outlined in such works as *The Right of Nations to Self Determination* (1914) and “The Revolutionary Proletariat Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination” (1915). As World War I erupted, some excellent revolutionaries — including Luxemburg and some comrades in the Bolshevik party — argued that all forms of nationalism are incompatible with working-class internationalism. Lenin sharply took issue with this conclusion. He argued there are different forms of nationalism, some worthy of support, others worthy of denunciation. A distinction must be made between the nationalism (to be opposed) of the imperialist nations and the nationalism (to be supported) of those countries oppressed by imperialism. As he put it in *Socialism and War* (1915), revolutionaries must “unequivocally demand that the socialists of the oppressing countries (of the so-called ‘great’ nations in particular) should recognize and defend the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination”. [\[35\]](#)

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After the overthrow of the tsar in early 1917, Lenin was sharply critical of the Russian moderates of the Provisional Government for not recognising Ukraine's right to independence. "Russia's revolutionary democrats, if they want to be truly revolutionary and truly democratic," Lenin insisted, "must regain for themselves, for the workers and peasants of Russia, the brotherly trust of the Ukrainian workers and peasants. This cannot be done without full recognition of the Ukraine's rights, including the *right* to free secession." He wryly commented that Russian "friendship" could not be imposed on Ukrainians but could only be won by treating Ukrainians as equals and acknowledging their right to secede from Russia, if they chose. [\[36\]](#)

When the Provisional Government was removed by the October 1917 revolution, the socialist government that Lenin now headed affirmed, more than once, "that the right to self-determination belongs to all nations oppressed by tsarism and the Great Russian bourgeoisie, up to and including the right of these nations to secede from Russia". Flowing from this, the Bolshevik regime declared that "we ... recognise the People's Ukrainian Republic, and its right to secede from Russia or enter into a treaty with the Russian Republic on federal or similar relations between them". Lenin insisted on recognition "at once, unconditionally and without reservations [of] everything that pertains to the Ukrainian people's national rights and national independence". [\[37\]](#)

Serious historians have traced the complexities of what happened next. Despite Lenin's position on Ukrainian self-determination, comments Perekhoda, on the ground "the local Bolsheviks were overwhelmed by events for which they were ill-prepared". In the swirl of the Russian civil war (in which Ukraine was a central battleground), anti-Bolshevik nationalists seized control of the independence movement. Fighting for their lives, the Bolsheviks on the scene fumbled badly more than once in relation to the question of self-determination, riding roughshod over formal Bolshevik commitments and driving many Ukrainians into open conflict with the new revolutionary regime. This greatly benefitted the counter-revolutionary White armies of General Anton Denikin. [\[38\]](#)

Throughout 1919, the Red Army battled to reverse this deteriorating situation. Late that year, its commander, Leon Trotsky, issued a proclamation to his troops, re-emphasising Lenin's earlier position:

Ukraine is the land of the Ukrainian workers and working peasants. They alone have the right to rule in Ukraine, to govern it and to build a new life in it. ... Keep this firmly in mind: your task is not to conquer Ukraine but to liberate it. When Denikin's bands have finally been smashed, the working people of the liberated Ukraine will themselves decide on what terms they are to live with Soviet Russia. We are all sure, and we know, that the working people of Ukraine will declare for the closest fraternal union with us. ... Long live the free and independent Soviet Ukraine! [\[39\]](#)

The Bolsheviks (now renamed Communists) shifted to this orientation. Lenin authored a resolution making it "incumbent on all party members to use every means to help remove all barriers in the way of the free development of the Ukrainian language and culture ... suppressed for centuries by Russian Tsarism and the exploiting classes". Historian Ronald Suny observes: "By the end of that civil war, Ukraine was more or less integrated into the Soviet Union. In the constitution of that early Soviet Union, Ukraine and the other Union republics were given the right to secede without any preconditions." [\[40\]](#)

"Ukraine was a devastated country at the end of the civil war," notes historian Mario Kessler. "The years 1921 and 1922 were marked by a catastrophic famine." Yet Leninist policy continued even as conditions of civil war and famine were left behind. "The situation began to improve following the constitution the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which Ukraine joined as a founding member in late 1922: the New Economic Policy (NEP) facilitated an economic recovery, the Ukrainian language and culture were promoted, and after the elimination of anti-Semitic legislation, Jewish intellectual culture experienced an unprecedented boom." [\[41\]](#)

All of this was reversed, however, after the 1920s victory of Joseph Stalin's faction in the Russian Communist Party. Moving against "nationalist deviations", in a brutal reversal of Bolshevik policy, Stalin's policies brought new horrors. In Ukraine, "forced collectivization of agriculture, economically induced famine, and brutal political persecution", Kessler recounts, "including starvation of entire territories, the Holodomor (the Ukrainian term for 'killing by starvation') cost the lives of at least 4 million people". [\[42\]](#)

From exile in 1939, Trotsky protested against Stalin's policies. The Soviet bureaucratic dictatorship, he commented, had "strangled and plundered the people within Great Russia", but "in the Ukraine matters were further complicated by the massacre of national hopes. Nowhere did restrictions, purges, repressions and in general all forms of bureaucratic hooliganism assume such murderous sweep as they did in the Ukraine in the struggle against the powerful, deeply rooted longings of the Ukrainian masses for greater freedom and independence." [\[43\]](#)

Of course, much has changed over the past century, but what happened yesterday can still teach us something today. Those with opposing orientations in our own time will secure different lessons from history. Putin's position is that the policies of Lenin and the Bolsheviks (Trotsky included) seriously undermined Russia's national interests, while Stalin's policies represented an important correction. Those who are committed to genuine democracy and revolutionary socialism, however, may have more to learn from Lenin and his comrades. [\[44\]](#)

## Where the weapons come from

If one seriously acknowledges the right of an oppressed nation to self-determination, and therefore to resist invasion from an oppressor nation, then it must be recognised that the oppressed nation has a right to secure weapons for this purpose. A major point of contention for those opposing Ukrainian armed resistance against the Russian invasion, however, is that the weapons necessary for such resistance are being supplied by Western imperialist powers, especially the US. For some, this means that the Ukrainians are doing the bidding of US imperialism, which is seen as the greatest threat to peace and freedom on our planet. Employing the logic that "the enemy of our enemy is our friend", some conclude that the Putin regime should be supported by all progressives who favour peace and freedom. There are others who do not believe that, but who still oppose the arming of the Ukrainian resistance by Western imperialism.

Anti-imperialists have not always denounced accepting arms from Western imperialist countries. During the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, the newly formed Spanish Republic was subjected to a

military onslaught by a right-wing coalition supported (and largely armed) by fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The Republic was defended by a coalition of liberals, Socialists, Communists (of both Stalinist and anti-Stalinist persuasion), and Anarchists — a coalition that was poorly armed. The so-called "Western democracies", consisting of imperialist countries that included the US, Britain, and France, imposed an arms embargo on Spain. Since this would give a considerable advantage to the right-wing and fascist forces (who were receiving plenty of arms from Germany and Italy), the embargo was fiercely denounced by left-wing activists throughout the world. There was widespread agitation for the Western (imperialist) democracies to aid the Spanish Republic. [\[45\]](#) In the same period, the military forces of Imperial Japan were invading the Chinese Republic, headed by the nationalist dictatorship of Chiang Kai-Shek, which in the late 1930s was compelled to form a united front with Chinese Communists to oppose the Japanese onslaught. Here too, a campaign was waged (including by left-wing activists) to secure military aid from the Western imperialist rivals of Imperial Japan. [\[46\]](#)

## Making sense of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the Chinese example, since Chiang Kai-shek's regime certainly did not have the progressive-democratic qualities that many saw in the Spanish Republic. "We need have no illusions about Chiang Kai-shek, his party, or the whole ruling class of China," Trotsky argued at the time. "Chiang Kai-shek is the executioner of the Chinese workers and peasants," Trotsky acknowledged. "But today he is forced, despite himself, to struggle against Japan for the remainder of the independence of China. Tomorrow he may again betray. ... But today he is struggling." Trotsky emphasised what he saw as the key point: "If Japan is an imperialist country and if China is the victim of imperialism, we favour China. Japanese patriotism is the hideous mask of worldwide robbery. Chinese patriotism is legitimate and progressive." [47] As it turned out, of course, US policymakers who ultimately supplied Chiang Kai-shek with weapons were manoeuvring to advance US imperial interests in China. But this neither obviates the validity of Trotsky's point nor did this prevent the later advance of the Chinese Revolution.

There are innumerable examples that can be found of revolutionaries, freedom fighters and leaders of resistance struggles against imperialism securing weapons by any means necessary, even from sources representing the opposite of what one is fighting for. One of the most outstanding examples can be found in the American Revolution of 1775-83, in which money, arms and direct military support from the French monarchy helped anti-colonial revolutionaries of North America to break free from the British monarchy. [48] Some argue that imperialist powers providing such assistance are only interested in advancing their own imperial interests, always seeking to manipulate the situation for their own advantage. Absolutely — that is what imperialists always do.

It is also true (for example, in the case of the American Revolution) that revolutionaries are also seeking to manipulate the situation (including the aid received) for the advantage of their revolutionary cause. It would have been a mistake for American revolutionaries, in exchange for French assistance, to violate revolutionary principles by integrating themselves into the French Empire — just as it would be a mistake for revolutionaries of today to integrate themselves into NATO. But it is not a mistake, in a life and death struggle, for freedom fighters to accept weapons from either the French monarchy of 1778 or from nations belonging to NATO in 2023. And it makes no sense to withhold support because revolutionaries are not getting weapons exclusively from angels. If the cause of revolutionaries and freedom fighters is just, they will be inclined to struggle for victory by any means necessary.

Source: [LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#), 6 October, 2023.

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