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War in Ukraine

# I Marched Against Putin's War for the Same Reason I Protested the War in Iraq

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**The antiwar movement was right to challenge the lies used to justify the US-UK invasion of Iraq. We should be equally willing to denounce Vladimir Putin's fake pretexts for war against Ukraine.**

I was born in Saint Petersburg, or Leningrad as we called it in the good old days. Until February 24, the last antiwar protest I attended was almost twenty years ago, back when George W. Bush and Tony Blair were planning the invasion of Iraq. I was a schoolboy in Britain, and we sat at the top of the football pitch and refused to go to class. True, most of us didn't understand the geopolitical situation too well — some were just trying to bunk off biology. But I knew enough to tell that if Saddam Hussein really did have weapons of mass destruction, surely that would be a good reason not to attack him?

With that experience in mind, earlier this year I also didn't believe all those warnings that Russia was about to invade Ukraine, coming from US spooks and the Pentagon. They had lied about Iraq — and I'm still anxiously awaiting Donald Trump's pee tape and who knows what else.

Then, on February 24, I found myself at another protest, except this time it was on Nevsky Prospekt in Saint Petersburg. Instead of angry teachers, we faced the OMON riot squad who dragged us away at random, including a mother carrying a baby and an elderly woman who survived the siege of Leningrad. That night, more than 1,700 people were [arrested](#) in fifty-three cities across Russia.

I could follow the logic in Russia bullying Ukraine into staying out of NATO. Let's not pretend the United States wouldn't threaten Armageddon if one of its neighbors joined a rival pact — just ask Cuba. And I could understand supporting the rebels. Ukraine has a complex national identity, and when the pro-Western uprising happened in 2014, it was presented as though “the people had spoken,” when many in the south and east saw events unfold rather differently.

I thought that way, right up until the bomb sirens sounded in Kyiv. I've been against all sorts of Western imperialism for a very long time, especially the American-imposed “[war on drugs](#).” So, it's frustrating when my comrades lap up my own motherland's lies about its blatantly imperialist war.

## Liberating Russian Speakers?

Vladimir Putin claims we're saving the Russian-speaking people of East Ukraine from genocide by the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion. If this was truly about saving them, Russian peacekeepers could have secured the Donbas in a day. I'm no general, but I doubt the Ukrainians would be foolish enough to try anything then. Even if they had — for whatever absurd reason — truly wanted to commit “genocide” on their own relatives, they wouldn't do it while hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers are standing by and they know Washington hasn't got their back.

I harbor no illusions about Azov. I've [interviewed](#) Sergey Korotkikh — he's not a neo-Nazi, he's *the* neo-Nazi. The man literally founded the National Socialist Society, which carried out a racist skinhead murder spree in Moscow in the late 2000s. Now he's an Azov commander. But flattening Mariupol to smoke them out is the same excuse Israel rolls out each time they bombard Gaza: blow up an apartment block, then claim there were terrorists inside using “human shields.” Do neo-Nazis exist in Ukraine? Yes. Is demolishing entire city blocks a reasonable and

proportionate response? No.

And just as a certain Israeli prime minister [said](#) "There was no such thing as Palestinians" — justifying decades of occupation and apartheid — so Putin has a bizarre delusion that Ukrainians don't exist either. They were just made up, by [Vladimir Lenin](#), apparently. Never mind the fact that we're supposedly fighting ultranationalists right now (of which nation, exactly?) seems to disprove that point.

And what about the long-suffering people of East Ukraine? Is Russia liberating them?

The United Nations observers, including Russia, [reported](#) over three thousand civilian deaths in 2014–15, at the peak of the fighting in Donbas, but only eighteen by 2021. That's a lower rate of violent death than [London's](#). If there was a concentrated effort to wipe out civilians by either side, it ended years ago. Yet right now, thousands of Russian speakers are dying in Ukraine, whereas they weren't when this "special operation" began.

Again, look at Iraq. For some Iraqis, Saddam's regime was a golden age. For others, it was hell on Earth: besides gassing the Kurds, Saddam invaded his neighbors (in the case of Iran, with America's support), and human rights were a sick joke. Being against the war in 2003 didn't mean you admired him. It meant that a "special operation" would bring even more death and suffering than there was already. Now Mariupol is rubble, and it wasn't that way before Russian "help."

To be sure, there was much about modern Ukraine that I, and many Russians, found toxic: the stubborn insistence on Ukrainian as the only official language, when a third of the population (at least) mainly spoke Russian; the Nazi collaborators promoted to national heroes. But that's not what is at issue now. Ukraine had not attacked us. Yet Russian missiles are striking cities like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Odesa — Russian-speaking cities — "defending" Russian speakers by flooring their homes into rubble.

Since this all kicked off, I've been to quite a few countries in or around Europe, and I personally haven't felt any Russophobia (I can't speak for others, but I didn't encounter it myself); in fact, the opposite. All the Ukrainians I've met knew immediately where I was from yet showed no seething rage but rather sympathy. It's almost as if the idea that Ukrainians who don't want a foreign army raping and pillaging on their soil are rabidly nationalist, Russian-hating Nazis is bullshit.

So, it's frustrating when some who call themselves anti-imperialists tell me they support Putin, either because they mistakenly believe only Israel, the United States, and on certain days Saudi Arabia can be the villains on the world stage, or they're trying to be nice, not knowing what I, as a Russian, actually think.

## Against Double Standards

Look, I get it: as Noam Chomsky says, you should begin by fighting imperialism at home. But guess what? I'm from an empire, too, and being Russian, I'd be a hypocrite if I called out Uncle Sam and not Uncle Vlad when he does the exact same thing.

We keep hearing that NATO is a defensive alliance whose members join it willingly, but look at it from Russia's perspective: our country is almost completely surrounded by US military bases. It doesn't matter how they got there, and "We're defensive, just trust me, bro!" doesn't exactly inspire confidence from a superpower that breaks international law faster than you can say "WMDs."

Washington had a similar fear of Soviet expansion in Latin America, so it staged coups, handed guns to cocaine-running counterrevolutionaries, and invaded sovereign islands to guard its sphere of influence. It was wrong then, it's wrong now, and it's still wrong when Putin does it. "They did it, so why can't I?" is the masterful reasoning of a five-year-old.

I don't like how NATO's crept up to Russia's borders for the past thirty years. But what I like even less is three-month-old [babies](#) in Odesa being blown to pieces by Russian missiles; Odesa, by the way, a city at the heart of Russian culture, music, and literature: Odessa Mama. It's as if the Americans bombed New Orleans. Saving Russian speakers, my ass.

Even if Ukraine joined NATO, so what? Turkey's in NATO, and we get along just fine. And if other countries, like Finland, didn't want to join NATO before, they sure as hell do now. All Putin's master plan to save us from NATO encirclement by adding another 1,340 kilometers of it to our border, I suppose.

And yes, the Western powers are hypocrites: Europe was all like #refugeeswelcome, only having just let thousands of black and brown children fill the seabed. It's good that they're helping Ukrainians now, but it would have been nice to see this attitude before. Yet there are [worse](#) things to be than a hypocrite — someone who cheers on war crimes, for instance.

And then there's this framing of Russia/Ukraine as the "civilized" Europeans vs. the barbaric [Asian hordes](#) and the pearl-clutching over how "this" could happen in [Europe](#). (Yugoslavia wasn't that long ago.) Russians have embraced European values since Peter the Great, and taking over land that doesn't belong to you then wiping out the natives who resist is as European as it gets. British history can be summed up as: "This is mine. Oh, you thought this was yours? Well, where's your gunpowder, then?" These Asian-hordes tropes belong in the 1800s.

But none of this racist Western hypocrisy is a good enough reason why Ukrainian women should be [raped](#) because their husbands are "Nazis."

For sure, some say that all didn't happen — the horrors in Bucha and Mariupol are Western [propaganda](#). It is curious how these hoaxes only seem to happen to the Russians and their allies and no one else. One would think Ukraine has a thriving film industry in the midst of a warzone, with thousands of extras so dedicated to their craft they'll have to stay in character the rest of their lives.

In fact, not only are they so convincing at playing dead, but they've got all their friends, relatives, and hundreds of international reporters in on the act.

## This Isn't World War II

Which is more likely — that for the first time in history, an invading army is behaving like they're at their grandma's house, or (picture this) the country being invaded is blowing themselves up to . . . make the invaders look bad?

If you don't trust the mainstream media, why do you trust the Russian mainstream media? Would you believe the White House press secretary if she spewed that garbage? What makes Putin's spokesmen like Dmitry Peskov and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov — who won't even call it a "war" — more trustworthy? Right until the bombs started dropping on Kyiv, the Russian government was still telling us there wouldn't be a war. Why should we believe anything that comes out of their mouths?

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Lavrov in particular seems to be losing his marbles. Adolf Hitler was [Jewish](#)? The West wants to [destroy](#) Orthodox Christendom? I don't know how much more of this stupidity I can take.

What I hear from such self-styled anti-imperialists is they only care about one empire. They don't care about us in Russia and Ukraine. Why don't you show solidarity with the tens of thousands of Russians, including leftists, [feminists](#), and anti-imperialists, who took to the streets against the war? Right now, it doesn't feel like you're on our side.

The USSR wasn't a perfect socialist utopia, but when my parents were growing up there was at least a pretense of pushing back against class and racial oppression (even if it didn't always turn out that way). That Soviet Union, which stood with Africa's liberation struggle, is dead. Putin's Russia, where a handful of his cronies hoard all the wealth, is now the opposite of whatever the USSR once stood for.

Putin is now what Bush was in 2003.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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