A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv

"The 'anti-imperialism of idiots' meant people turned a blind eye to Russia's actions"

We republish below an important open letter from Taras Bilous a leading activist of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organisation Social Movement, republished from Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and originally published by Open Democracy.

I am writing these lines in Kyiv while it is under artillery attack.

Until the last minute, I had hoped that Russian troops wouldn't launch a full-scale invasion. Now, I can only thank those who leaked the information to the US intelligence services.

Yesterday, I spent half the day considering whether I ought to join a territorial defence unit. During the night that followed, the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi signed a full mobilisation order and Russian troops moved in and prepared to encircle Kyiv, which made the decision for me.

But before taking up my post, I would like to communicate to the Western Left what I think about its reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

First of all, I am thankful to those Leftists who are now picketing Russian embassies – even those who took their time to realise Russia was the aggressor in this conflict.

I am thankful to politicians who support putting pressure on Russia to stop the invasion and withdraw its troops.

And I am thankful to the delegation of British and Welsh MPs, unionists, and activists who came to support us and hear us in the days before the Russian invasion.

I am also thankful to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign in the UK for its help over many years.

This article is about the other part of the Western Left. Those who imagined 'NATO aggression in Ukraine', and who could not see Russian aggression – like the New Orleans chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Or the DSA International Committee, which published a shameful statement failing to say a single critical word against Russia (I am very thankful to US professor and activist Dan la Botz and the others for their critique of this statement).

Or those who criticised Ukraine for not implementing the Minsk Agreements and kept silent about their violations by Russia and the so-called 'People's Republics'.

Or those who exaggerated the influence of the far-Right in Ukraine, but did not notice the far-Right in the 'People's Republics' and avoided criticising Putin's conservative, nationalist and authoritarian policy. Part of the responsibility for what is happening rests with you.

'Campism'

This is part of the wider phenomenon in the Western 'anti-war' movement, usually called 'campism' by critics on the Left. British-Syrian author and activist Leila Al-Shami gave it a stronger name: the "anti-imperialism of idiots". Read her wonderful 2018 essay if you haven't done so yet. I will repeat only the main thesis here: the activity of a large part of the Western 'anti-war' Left over the war in Syria had nothing to

do with stopping the war. It only opposed Western interference, while ignoring, or even supporting, the engagement of Russia and Iran, to say nothing of their attitude to the 'legitimately elected' Assad regime in Syria.

"A number of anti-war organisations have justified their silence on Russian and Iranian interventions by arguing that 'the main enemy is at home,'" Al-Shami wrote. "This excuses them from undertaking any serious power analysis to determine who the main actors driving the war actually are.

Unfortunately, we have seen the same ideological cliché repeated over Ukraine. Even after Russia recognised the independence of the 'People's Republics' earlier this week, Branko Marcetic, a writer for American Left magazine Jacobin, penned an article almost fully devoted to criticising the US. When it came to Putin's actions, he went only as far as remarking that the Russian leader had "signal[led] less-than-benign ambitions". Seriously?

I am not a fan of NATO. I know that after the end of the Cold War, the bloc lost its defensive function and led aggressive policies. I know that NATO's eastward expansion undermined efforts directed at nuclear disarmament and forming a system of joint security. NATO tried to marginalise the role of the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and to discredit them as 'inefficient organisations'. But we cannot bring back the past, and we have to orient ourselves on the current circumstances when seeking a way out of this situation.

How many times did the Western Left bring up the US's informal promises to the former Russian president, Mikhail Gorbachev, about NATO ("not one inch eastward"), and how many times did it mention the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that guarantees Ukraine's sovereignty? How often did the Western Left support the "legitimate security concerns" of Russia, a state that owns the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal? And how often

did it recall the security concerns of Ukraine, a state that had to trade its nuclear weapons, under the pressure of the US and Russia, for a piece of paper (the Budapest Memorandum) that Putin trampled conclusively in 2014? Did it ever occur to Leftist critics of NATO that Ukraine is the main victim of the changes brought about by the NATO expansion?

Time and again, the Western Left responded to the critique of Russia by mentioning US aggression against Afghanistan, Iraq and other states. Of course, these states need to be brought into the discussion – but how, exactly?

The argument of the Left should be, that in 2003, other governments did not put enough pressure on the United States over Iraq. Not that it is necessary to exert less pressure on Russia over Ukraine now.

An obvious mistake

Imagine for a moment that, in 2003, when the US was preparing for the invasion of Iraq, Russia had behaved like the US has in recent weeks: with threats of escalation.

Now imagine what the Russian Left might have done in that situation, according to the dogma of 'our main enemy is at home'. Would it have criticised the Russian government for this 'escalation', saying that it 'should not jeopardise inter-imperialist contradictions'? It is obvious to everyone that such behaviour would have been a mistake in that case. Why was this not obvious in the case of the aggression against Ukraine?

If the US and Russia reached an agreement and started a new Cold War against China, would that really be what we wanted?

In another Jacobin article from earlier this month, Marcetic went as far as saying that Fox News's Tucker Carlson was "completely right" about the "Ukrainian crisis". What Carlson

had done was question "Ukraine's strategic value to the United States". Even Tariq Ali in the New Left Review approvingly quoted the calculation of German admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, who said that giving Putin "respect" over Ukraine was "low cost, even no cost" given that Russia could be a useful ally against China. Are you serious? If the US and Russia could reach an agreement and start a new Cold War against China as allies, would that really be what we wanted?

Reforming the UN

I am not a fan of liberal internationalism. Socialists should criticise it. But this does not mean that we have to support the division of 'spheres of interest' between imperialist states. Instead of looking for a new balance between the two imperialisms, the Left has to struggle for a democratisation of the international security order. We need a global policy and a global system of international security. We have the latter: it is the UN. Yes, it has plenty of flaws, and it is often the object of fair criticisms. But one can criticise either to refute something or to improve it. In the case of the UN, we need the latter. We need a Leftist vision of reform and democratisation of the UN.

Of course, this does not mean that the Left should support all of the UN's decisions. But an overall reinforcement of the UN's role in the resolution of armed conflicts would allow the Left to minimise the importance of military-political alliances and reduce the number of victims. (In a previous article, I wrote how UN peacekeepers could have helped to resolve the Donbas conflict. Unfortunately, this has now lost its relevance.) After all, we also need the UN to solve the climate crisis and other global problems. The reluctance of many international Leftists to appeal to it is a terrible mistake.

After Russian troops invaded Ukraine, *Jacobin's* Europe editor

David Broder wrote that the Left "should make no apologies for opposing a US military response". This was not Biden's intention anyway, as he said multiple times. **But a large part of the Western Left should honestly admit that it completely fucked up in formulating its response to the "Ukrainian crisis".**

My perspective

I will finish by briefly writing about myself and my perspective.

Over the past eight years, the Donbas war has been the main issue that has divided the Ukrainian Left. Each of us formed our position under the influence of personal experience and other factors. Thus, another Ukrainian Leftist would have written this article differently.

I was born in the Donbas, but in a Ukrainian-speaking and nationalist family. My father became involved in the far-Right in the 1990s, observing Ukraine's economic decay and the enrichment of the former Communist Party leadership, which he had been fighting since the mid-1980s. Of course, he has very anti-Russian, but also anti-American views. I still remember his words on 11 September 2001. As he watched the Twin Towers falling on TV, he said that those responsible were 'heroes' (he does not think so anymore – now he believes that the Americans blew them up on purpose).

When the war began in Donbas in 2014, my father joined the far-Right Aidar battalion as a volunteer, my mother fled Luhansk, and my grandfather and grandmother stayed in their village which fell under the control of the 'Luhansk People's Republic'. My grandfather condemned Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution. He supports Putin, who, he says, has "restored order in Russia". Nevertheless, we all try to keep talking to each other (though not about politics) and to help each other. I try to be sympathetic towards them. After all, my

grandfather and grandmother spent their whole life working on a collective farm. My father was a construction worker. Life has not been kind to them.

The events of 2014 – revolution followed by war – pushed me in the opposite direction of most people in Ukraine. The war killed nationalism in me and pushed me to the Left. I want to fight for a better future for humanity, and not for the nation. My parents, with their post-Soviet trauma, do not understand my socialist views. My father is condescending about my 'pacifism', and we had a nasty conversation after I showed up at an anti-fascist protest with a picket sign calling for the disbanding of the far-Right Azov regiment.

When Volodymyr Zelenskyi became president of Ukraine in the spring of 2019, I hoped this could prevent the catastrophe that is unfolding now. After all, it is difficult to demonise a Russian-speaking president who won with a programme of peace for Donbas and whose jokes were popular among Ukrainians as well as Russians. Unfortunately, I was mistaken. While Zelenskyi's victory changed the attitude of many Russians towards Ukraine, this did not prevent the war.

In recent years, I have written about the peace process and about civilian victims on both sides of the Donbas war. I tried to promote dialogue. But this has all gone up in smoke now. There will be no compromise. Putin can plan whatever he wants, **but even if Russia seizes Kyiv and instals its occupational government, we will resist it. The struggle will last until Russia gets out of Ukraine and pays for all the victims and all the destruction.**

Hence, my last words are addressed to the Russian people: hurry up and overthrow the Putin regime. It is in your interests as well as ours.

25 February 2022 Republished from Ukraine Solidarity Campaign

https://ukrainesolidaritycampaign.org/2022/02/25/a-letter-to-the-western-left-from-kyiv/

Кампанія Солідарності з Україною (ukrainesolidaritycampaign.org)

