Russia's war on Ukraine and the European lefts – Murray Smith writes

Murray Smith writes on the Russia's war on Ukraine and the response of the left.

Editorial note by ecosocialist.scot: Murray Smith is a well known figure on the left in Scotland. He studied History, Politics and Soviet Studies at the University of Glasgow, was a founder of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), SSP International Secretary for a period in its early days, and editor of the journal Frontline, a prominent marxist journal in Scotland during the early 2000's. Currently he lives in Luxembourg where he is is a leading member of the left wing party Déi Lénk (The Left), and its representative on leading bodies of the European Left Party. In this lengthy article Murray Smith explains the background to the internationalist and marxist position on the war in Ukraine and describes the retrograde position of 'campism' – those on the left who see the Ukraine war as nothing more than a proxy war between the USA and Russia in which the interests of the 40+million Ukraine working class are regarded as irrelevant. He also explodes the myths that the Russian aggression against Ukraine was justified by the allegations of a 'right wing coup d'etat' in 2014 and that US foreign policy is entirely aimed at military aggression against the Russian state. At its most recent conference in March 2023, the current day SSP lapsed into the position of 'campism', with many of the arguments used by leading figures, such as the present International Secretary Bill Bonnar, being drawn entirely from the arguments that Murray Smith demolishes below. The (unpublished) position passed by the SSP in March supports the campaign of those who now seek to disarm the Ukraine working class, a position that has been regrettably advanced in the UCU and

other trade unions in Britain, and stands in counter-position to that passed overwhelmingly by the annual congress of the Scottish TUC , backed by the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, which supported Ukraine's right of self-defence against the Russian invasion and right to get weapons from wherever it wishes. All the evidence is that the vast majority of working class people in Scotland support Ukraine's right to self-determination and right to resist Russia's invasion militarily. Bill Bonnar has been declared as the SSP candidate in the forthcoming Rutherglen and Hamilton West Westminster by-election and this will provide an opportunity for the SSP position on Ukraine to be examined in public and contrasted with the arguments of Murray Smith below. The article was originally published on the website of 'Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières' (European Solidarity without Boundaries)

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The war in Ukraine has cast a harsh light on the radical left in Europe, revealing the best and the worst. On the one hand, an internationalist response of solidarity with Ukraine. On the other, a "peace camp" where you find pacifists, but especially sectarians, for whom the main enemy is always US imperialism. Rather than a movement for peace, it is above all a movement of non-solidarity with Ukraine. We will come back to that.

Let's start with some thoughts on war. We can be against war in general. We can consider that we must overcome this barbaric way of settling conflicts. We can think that it is possible to do it in the existing capitalist society, or that to put an end to war it is necessary to finish with capitalism. But historically, and again today, the left is

never confronted with war in general, but with real existing wars, specific wars, which succeed each other and do not always have the same nature. So, each war must be analyzed in its specificity. There are no slogans outside of time and space, which are valid for all wars. It is not because Lenin or Luxemburg or Liebknecht spoke of revolutionary defeatism or said that the enemy was in one's own country, that we can trot out these slogans for any war, independently of the context.

World War I was an inter-imperialist conflict over the distribution of territories, resources and markets. Those who refused to support their own imperialism were right. And history proved them right. The activity of the small minority of internationalist circles of 1914 led to strikes, mutinies, mass parties and revolutions. Yet since 1914 no war has been a simple repetition of World War I, and a simple repetition of the slogans of 1914 has not been enough. In all the wars of national liberation against the colonial empires, it was clear that it was necessary to support the insurgents who fought for the independence of their countries. The same applies to attacks on independent countries by imperialist powers. So, in the 1930s, the left supported China against Japan and Ethiopia against Italy. And, closer to the present day, Iraq against the United States. This despite the fact that these countries were ruled by regimes that the left could not support.

In general, it is not obligatory for the left to take a position in the civil wars of other countries. But in some cases it is, on the basis of political criteria. Obviously, it was necessary to support Soviet Russia against the Whites and the imperialist armies that helped them. And in Spain from 1936 to 1939, without going into all the political complexities, it was a war against fascism where the Republican camp had to be supported against the Francoists, whatever one might think of the Popular Front government. And this would have been the case even if the Francoists had not been supported by Germany and Italy. Immediately after came

World War II, which was much more complex (and more global) than the first. And which posed political and tactical problems that cannot be dealt with in detail here. But it must be clear that revolutionary defeatism and the enemy being one's own country did not fit there. It was not indifferent to live in a bourgeois democracy or under the Nazi yoke. Many European countries learned this from bitter experience.

The guiding line is to put ourselves at the service of the exploited and oppressed. Of those who want to liberate their country from colonialism or other forms of domination, or to defend their country against aggression. We must think in terms of peoples and classes, not blocs or spheres of influence, which are only vehicles for the oppression of small countries by the dominant. powers. In doing so, we must give priority to political action and not geopolitical constructions.

The current war is in its essence not complicated at all. A country, Ukraine, which had been part of the Russian empire, was invaded by Russia, the current expression of this empire, which it wants to rebuild. Whether you call Russia imperial, imperialist or whatever, it is indisputable that it launched the war with the aim of subjugating Ukraine to its will.

Even those who refuse to support Ukraine cannot deny the reality of the invasion. So, they find excuses. Yes, Russia invaded, but it was threatened, surrounded, provoked, so it had to defend itself. And they build a whole edifice to demonstrate that the war is really between the United States and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other. And the Ukrainians who resist the invasion? Nothing but pawns in a "proxy war".

In all this mess one could almost believe that Russia is a peaceful country, which has never hurt anyone. But, in reality, it is the most reactionary, repressive and aggressive country in Europe. And it is the heir of centuries of wars and

annexations by an empire of which Marx always understood that it was the gendarme of Europe, of the peoples of Europe. As for Lenin, he never underestimated the reactionary force represented by Great Russian chauvinism.

In the European left, we can agree on at least three points:

- Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022.
- To resist this invasion, Ukraine received a considerable amount of weapons, mainly from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries and especially from the United States.
- NATO has seen an eastward expansion since the 1990s, notably incorporating the countries that were previously part of the Warsaw Pact, as well as three former Soviet republics, the three Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

From these three observations, we can arrive at different, even contradictory, analyses and conclusions. But those who seek to relativize or even deny Russia's responsibility for the war are forced to deny certain facts and invent others.

Russia invaded

Why did Russia invade Ukraine?

Whether the invasion is against international law, however true that may be, is entirely secondary. The bottom line is that Russia, an imperial, imperialist, dominant power for centuries, does not accept that the republics of the former Soviet Union, independent since 1991, should escape its control. In particular, it has never really recognized the independence of Ukraine. It has always wanted, at a minimum, a government in Kyiv under its orders, without excluding the annexation of all or part of its territory. And it has said so more and more openly.

Ukraine had been part of the Tsarist empire, of the "prison

house of nations". It was Lenin who characterized it thus and who also said: "What Ireland was for England, Ukraine has become for Russia: exploited to the extreme, without receiving anything in return." In addition to economic exploitation, there was under Tsarism the banning of the Ukrainian language and the repression of anything that could express Ukrainian identity, culturally and politically. After a brief period in the 1920s when Ukrainian language and culture were encouraged, the Stalinist counter-revolution brought a halt to it. Between famine and terror, the 1930s were a dark decade for Ukraine, followed by war.

Despite this history, a certain left would have us believe that if Putin went to war it was because of NATO's eastward expansion, which he saw as a threat and against which he was reacting.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence that Putin always knew exactly what he wanted, that he was not pushed or provoked by anyone. We can start with his famous observation in 2005, when he said that "the disintegration of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." Geopolitical, not social. What he wanted (since well before 2005) and still wants is to regain control of the territory of the former USSR, which moreover corresponded more or less to that of the Tsarist empire. And it is this empire that he wants to rebuild. Not necessarily by annexing the former republics but by controlling them. And in addition, to regain the sphere of influence in Europe that Stalin had established in 1945. In this project, Ukraine occupies a central place. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, adviser to Carter and Obama, said: "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire." Because we must never forget that Russia is not a national state, but precisely an empire.

So, in Putin's vision and in his plan there was no room for an independent Ukraine, especially since it was increasingly turning towards the West.

Euromaidan

Before February 24, there was 2014. The gulf between a part of the Western left and the Ukrainian reality already manifested itself then.

The idea that the annexation of Crimea was a reaction to the Maidan "coup" does not hold water. First, we can only speak of a far-right "coup d'état" or "coup de force" without taking the trouble to make a concrete analysis of a mass movement that lasted three months and of its evolution. And by replacing it with a *made in Russia* caricature. But the peddlers of such a caricature should no longer expect to be taken seriously. For those who want to understand, there are books, interviews with participants and articles that are easily accessible online. There's even Wikipedia.

The same people who talk of a far-right coup in Kyiv explain that Putin annexed Crimea in reaction to it. But the annexation of Crimea was discussed and planned before the fall of Yanukovych and the victory of Maidan. And not only Crimea. The whole plan to annex the eastern and southern oblasts, going through a phase of "people's republics", was also put forward in a document submitted for discussion in the Russian presidential administration between the 4th and 12th February 2014 and published in full by the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* on February 26, 2015. The newspaper's introduction begins with a quote that says it all: "We consider that it is appropriate to initiate the accession of the eastern regions to Russia". The document begins with three observations: the bankruptcy of Yanukovych, who was rapidly losing control of the political process; then the paralysis of the government and the lack of a body politic of interlocutors with which Russia could negotiate; and finally, that such an "acceptable" body politic was unlikely to come out of the scheduled elections.

Moreover, we were able to recently read the testimony of Bill Clinton, who recounts a conversation with Putin in 2011, where

the latter said that he did not agree with the agreement that Clinton had made with Yeltsin. This was the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, where in exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons, Ukraine's sovereignty and borders would be guaranteed by Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Putin reportedly said: "I don't agree with this deal. And I don't support it. And I am not bound by it". And Clinton adds: "I knew from that day that it was just a matter of time." Three years in fact, before Putin found the right opportunity to do what he had already decided to do.

To get the "accession" plan started, it was obviously necessary to be able to count on support from the population. In his speech before the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, where he already questioned the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state, Putin spoke at one time of 17 million Russian speakers in Ukraine and at another time of 17 million Russians. It is possible that he thought they were the same thing. And even that he believed his own propaganda about the "persecution of Russian speakers". But being a Russian speaker does not mean that you are Russian. One can be a Russian speaker and a Ukrainian patriot. This was already evident in 2014, even in the Donbas. And even more today. But there are many testimonies of Russian soldiers who were truly astonished to encounter the hostility of the inhabitants of the occupied areas. They had believed what they had been told, that they would be welcomed as liberators.

NATO enlargement

The equivalent of NATO in the Soviet bloc was the Warsaw Pact, established in 1955. East Germany – the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – which was part of it, ceased to exist upon German reunification in October 1990. But after the fall of the Wall in November 1989 and even before the first free elections in the GDR in March 1990, it was obvious that we were moving towards more or less rapid reunification. The question was: what reunification? One possibility was that of

a united and neutral Germany. The other, that of a united Germany, a member of NATO, the preferred choice of the United States in particular. It was in this context that US Secretary of State James Baker, seeking a way forward, floated in conversation with Gorbachev on February 9, 1990, the idea that a united Germany could be a member of NATO, and that in return there would be a commitment that NATO would not advance one inch ("not an inch") towards the East. Gorbachev mostly agreed. The day after. Baker put both possibilities to Kohl, who ended up preferring the second choice. We know how events went afterwards.

The whole edifice of this history of NATO, which supposedly promised not to expand towards the East and which broke its promise, is built around this little phrase from Baker, which is still subject to debate. A promise or a mere hypothesis? Concerning only Germany, or all of Eastern Europe? What is certain is that there was never a written commitment. Putin himself regrets this, saying in his interviews with Oliver Stone that nothing "was written down…In politics, everything has to be written down". Besides, even if there had been something written down, it could not have been definitive. Like the Budapest Memorandum… Diplomacy and international relations are not based on promises, oral or written, but on formal treaties. Which can also be violated, but this is rather rare, since if a regime systematically violates treaties, no one will want to negotiate with it anymore.

The only treaty signed was the "Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany" of September 1990. The signatories were the two German states, plus France, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and the United States. This treaty stipulated that there would be neither non-German troops nor nuclear weapons on the territory of the former GDR. It was respected.

On the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall, Gorbachev confirmed that there was no promise regarding NATO

enlargement, that there was not even a discussion about it. But he added that the enlargement had been a “big mistake” and a violation of the “spirit” of what was said in 1990.

So this story of the broken promise, which is after all the starting point of the entire discourse about an aggressive and treacherous NATO, is based on a sentence from a US politician to the president of a country, the Soviet Union, which neither of them suspected would no longer exist less than two years later.

Not only did the Americans not see the breakup of the Soviet Union coming, they did not even want it. They were quite ready to deal with Gorbachev’s Soviet Union. President George H. W. Bush even initially opposed Ukrainian independence, notably in his famous “Chicken Kiev” speech.

Let us look at the East-West relations at the time. Already in 1991, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) had been created between the countries of NATO and those of the Warsaw Pact. In 1994, the Partnership for Peace was created, with the members of the NACC and a few others, notably Kazakhstan.

In 1993, Yeltsin wrote to Clinton: “Any possible integration of Eastern European countries into NATO will not automatically lead to the alliance somehow turning against Russia.” In 1997, the NATO-Russia Deed of Foundation was concluded, which noted that NATO and Russia “do not consider each other as adversaries” and saw NATO enlargement as “a process which will continue”.

All of this was happening under Yeltsin’s mandate. This does not indicate an attitude of confrontation or a search for a weakening of Russia, rather a search for cooperation and integration into the international order dominated by the West.

Did Putin have a different attitude? Initially, there was no break with NATO. Putin was not against equal relations with

the alliance. The NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002. Putin said the same year in a press conference with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma: “I am absolutely convinced that Ukraine will not remain in retreat from the growing processes of interaction with NATO. The decision is to be taken between NATO and Ukraine. This is a question that concerns these two partners”. And in 2004, when seven countries joined NATO: “Each country has the right to choose the option it considers the most effective for ensuring its own security”. At the time, Russia expressed some concerns, but did not really see NATO as a threat. How to explain the change?

Putin was convinced from the beginning of his first term, or even well before, of the need to restore order inside the country (by asserting his own authority) and to restore Russia to what he considered to be its place in the world. At first, he may well have thought that this could be done within the framework of good economic and political relations with the United States and Europe and even with NATO. In reality, the West was perfectly prepared to have good relations with Russia. But accepting a Russian sphere of influence, as Putin understood it, especially in Europe, was another matter.

Putin began to adopt a more muscular discourse, in particular in his speech in Munich in 2007. He took part in the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, raising his tone by questioning the legitimacy of Ukraine. Even after the lightning war against Georgia in 2008, Russia took part in NATO exercises in 2011. It was from 2014 that the rupture was consummated, following the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Donbas. And it is also from that point that the anti-NATO discourse became systematic. The rupture took place not following the enlargement of NATO but following the use of force by Russia against Ukraine. And this use of force took place following the Maidan revolution, which far from being a coup was a profound movement, especially of the youth.

As far as Ukraine is concerned, Russia never accepted its

independence, but was at first confident in its ability to influence politically the course of events by relying on Ukrainian political currents favorable to strong ties with Russia. We must add to that a systematic infiltration of the Ukrainian state apparatus, especially the security organs, the extent of which was revealed in 2014. The first shock occurred in 2004, with the so-called "Orange Revolution", in fact a mass movement against electoral fraud. Coming after the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia and before the "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan, it was enough to worry Putin, who feared contagion. Hence the discourse on "color revolutions" supposedly guided by the hand of Washington. In Ukraine, Yanukovych's rise to power in 2009 seemed like a return to normal, but the next shock, the Maidan, was a bigger blow for Russia.

NATO enlargement took place quite quickly, between 1999 and 2009 for the most part. It certainly corresponded to the interests of the United States, but probably more to consolidate its influence in Europe rather than to confront Russia. But we must not, as the Western left often does, forget what the most interested parties thought, those who lived in the countries concerned. It is clear that NATO membership corresponded not only to the wishes of the new capitalist elites in these countries but also to the will of the peoples. In Hungary a referendum saw more than 85 per cent vote "Yes" to NATO. There is no reason to think that NATO membership would not have had broad majority support everywhere. Simply because all these countries had been dominated by Russia for decades, and some of them, for centuries.

As for the "encirclement" of Russia by NATO, let's be serious. Just look at a map. The three countries with the longest borders with Russia are China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan, none of which are members of NATO. What there is today, from Finland through to Bulgaria is a barrier, a line of defense.

And this line is a defense against Russia, not a threat to it. Putin is not afraid of NATO attacking Russia. Russia is a nuclear power, as he keeps reminding us, and no nuclear power has ever been invaded. What bothers Putin is not a military threat. It’s quite simply that the accession of these countries to the European Union and to NATO is a way of definitively turning their backs on Moscow and gravitating towards the West.

Weapons for Ukraine

No one disputes the fact that Ukraine received weapons. What is questionable is the idea that this demonstrates that what is happening is therefore a proxy war between NATO and Russia. And for this to be credible, a story is invented where Ukraine has been armed and prepared for this war since 2014.

Before returning to this, let’s look at the example of the Vietnam War.

What was the character of this war? It was obviously a war of national liberation against US imperialism and its Vietnamese auxiliaries, the continuation of the First Indochina War against France. Did Vietnam have support in its fight? Yes, it was helped by the Soviet Union and China.

Chinese military aid began in the latter period of the First Indochina War. Following the victory of the Chinese Revolution, between 1950 and 1954, this was considerable and very useful: rifles, machine guns, mortars, artillery pieces, etc. After the Geneva agreements in 1954, which split Vietnam in two, China did not want a new war. But when the Vietnamese took the decision to reunite their country by force, it continued to provide military aid, which was still very useful, especially in the first period of the war, from 1959 to 1963. China also sent troops to Vietnam, especially to defend Hanoi and its surroundings. At the high point in 1967, there were 170,000 Chinese troops. A thousand Chinese troops

died during the war.

At the height of the war, Soviet aid began to play an increasingly important role in quantity and quality. Faced with the escalation of US intervention from 1964, the type of aid that the Soviets were able to provide played a crucial role, in particular in defending North Vietnam against US bombardments. This aid seriously increased after the fall of Khrushchev. On November 17, 1964, the CPSU Politburo decided to increase its support for Vietnam. This aid included combat aircraft, radar, artillery, anti-aircraft defense systems, small arms, ammunition, food and medicine deliveries. In 1965, the Soviets took a step further by sending surface-to-air missiles and fighter planes. In addition, Vietnam received about 2000 tanks, as well as helicopters and other equipment. The Soviet Union also sent about 15,000 military specialists to Vietnam. As advisers, but also, especially at the beginning, as fighters operating anti-aircraft defense systems. And also, occasionally as pilots. Which was less necessary once 5000 Vietnamese had been trained as pilots in the Soviet Union. All this equipment and Soviet specialists were sent to North Vietnam. Some of the equipment subsequently headed south. But not the specialists. The Soviets wanted to avoid any escalation, and therefore took no risk of Soviet-American clashes.

US forces lost 4000 planes during the war. Without Soviet help, this would have been hard to imagine. The extent of Soviet military aid, but also Chinese, is striking. Obviously, they were weapons of the 1960s, less sophisticated than those of today. But, in the context, this aid was certainly more substantial than the weapons sent to Ukraine up until today.

The Vietnam War coincided with the Sino-Soviet schism. Relations between the two countries were execrable; in 1969 they even came close to armed conflict. Out of necessity, and not without friction, they were obliged to cooperate to help the Vietnamese. But each of them was trying to pull Vietnam

into its orbit. Did all this change the nature of war? No. It was still a war of national liberation. The extent of Soviet and Chinese aid and the possible motivations of these two regimes did not change anything.

Back to Ukraine. I have appendix at the end of this article, a piece from the *Quotidien* in Luxembourg (based on the work of the Kiel Institute): a good summary of the arms deliveries. First observation: the weapons are indeed more and more heavy. But at the beginning, in February-March 2022, they were not heavy at all. At first the Americans, like the Russians, like almost everyone, thought that the Russians would quickly occupy Kyiv, Kharkiv and other cities, and that Ukrainians would at best wage a war of resistance in the west and a war of partisans elsewhere. That is why the US wanted to evacuate Zelensky to Lviv or even out of the country. Against all expectations, things turned out differently. The Russians were forced to withdraw from the north of the country. The Ukrainians had therefore scored a first victory. It was important. Having shown what they could do, they were given heavier weapons, which they would need for the fighting in the east and south.

But some weapons were still missing. The Ukrainians had been begging for months for modern tanks before receiving them, and so far, not enough of them. They have had HIMARS short-range missiles (70km) since last year. Then medium-range missiles (130km) and finally, in May, the British long-range Storm Shadows. It seems that now they will also receive long range missiles from France. And only now do they have the promise of receiving what they have been demanding for months: F-16 fighter jets. In the meantime, they operate with Soviet-made planes (considerably modernized, of course) that they have received from Eastern European countries. Quite recently, Germany authorized the delivery of five MiGs that had been part of the air force of the GDR, a country that ceased to exist in 1990. Putin must have trembled…

US goals and actions

The United States has two concerns. They really want to help Ukraine to defend itself; they do not want to see it occupied by Russia. But at the same time, they are afraid of an escalation with Russia, which explains the slowness and hesitation in the delivery of sophisticated weapons. It is also possible that they wish to avoid a total military defeat of Russia for fear of the destabilizing consequences, preferring to let them withdraw gently or even let them keep some territorial gains. But this also depends on the balance of power on the ground. Nevertheless, if the blockages on the types of armament supplied tend to be lifted, albeit slowly, it is not only because of pressure from Ukraine and some other countries, but because of the behavior of the Russians. Except for the use of nuclear weapons, they do just about everything, including attacks against infrastructures and civilian targets, not to mention the crimes they commit in the occupied areas.

It should be added, however, that the slowness of deliveries from certain countries can also have a logistical aspect. Because contrary to what some campists/pacifists say, far from permanently militarizing, the reality is that after the end of the Cold War, most NATO member countries seriously reduced their military personnel and expenditure. This was particularly the case in Germany.

An examination of the period between 2014 and 2022 is quite revealing. We are very far from the image of a NATO that was arming Ukraine against Russia. During Obama's presidency, until 2017, the total arms deliveries by the United States to Ukraine was zero. That was Obama's policy. And since it was the United States that led the way, NATO member countries in Western Europe followed its lead. Poroshenko, then president of Ukraine, was present at the emergency NATO summit in Wales in September 2014. He asked for weapons but left empty-handed. Only certain Eastern European countries, notably Poland,

provided some weapons, but in small quantities. After some hesitation, Trump supplied Javelin anti-tank missiles: a first delivery in 2018, followed by others in 2019 and 2021. But the Ukrainians only received authorization in 2020 to deploy them to the front in the Donbas.

The Wales NATO summit was supposed to sound the alarm and push member countries to increase their military spending to two per cent of their GDP. It must be noted that the response was overall quite lukewarm. It took February 24 for that to begin to change.

Minsk agreements

Far from preparing for war, the response of the United States after 2014 was to push Ukraine towards an agreement with Russia within the framework of the infamous Minsk agreements, the application of which was subcontracted to France and Germany. These agreements had been imposed on Ukraine by Russia in 2014-15 on the basis of a military balance of forces unfavorable to the Ukrainians. Beyond their inconsistencies and ambiguities, they had, according to [according to Wolfgang Sporrer], a diplomat working for the OSCE who was involved in the Minsk process, an even greater weakness. They were not getting to the root of the conflict. According to him, this stemmed from Russia's desire to exert its influence on Ukraine's internal policy and international relations: the fundamental conflict was that between Moscow and Kyiv. In itself, the Donbas problem was quite solvable. But for Russia the "republics" constituted a useful lever of pressure on Ukraine.

While refusing to send weapons, the United States and NATO did send military equipment – helmets, boots, bulletproof vests, night goggles, computer equipment, etc. But they did something more important: they provided training for the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). And in a serious way. During 2015, there were three major training programmes, led by the United States,

Canada and Great Britain, respectively. In total, the number of Ukrainian military personnel who went through these programs was more than 70,000. So, NATO was ready to give Ukraine the means to have what it had lacked in 2014, a modern army worthy of the name. But not to provide it with the necessary weapons. If they had, the current war could have been shortened or even avoided.

In conclusion, we can say that the United States and, even more so, some of their NATO allies (especially France and Germany) still bear some responsibility for the current war. But not in the sense of pushing for war. Quite the opposite. They persisted beyond reason in treating the Putin regime as a rational, responsible and reliable partner. Yet the alarm signals were not lacking. From Chechnya in the 1990s, via Georgia, Syria, Crimea, Donbas. We can even consider that the softness of the West's reactions on all these occasions encouraged Putin to think that he could safely dare to invade Ukraine in 2022. Besides, it is even possible that if "the special operation" had been as rapid as expected he might have been right…

The divisions of the left

The European radical left is deeply divided over Ukraine. It is not just an ideological battle but involves choices that determine political action. Not only does the left adopt different positions from one country to another, but often there are divisions within the left in the same country.

It is possible to identify three major currents: the internationalist current, the campist current and the pacifist current.

The first is clearly in solidarity with Ukraine. It supports the country in its war of resistance against the Russian invasion. For many, this also includes support for sending arms, but, at a minimum, support is expressed by clearly

putting forward the demand for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, unconditionally. And also, as much as possible, by providing material assistance.

The campist current considers that the main cause of the war, or at least an important cause, is the enlargement of NATO towards the east, which leads it to dilute Russia's responsibility for the war without necessarily denying it completely. In general, this current calls for ceasefires and negotiations. Without conditions and sometimes specifying on the current front lines. And it either refuses to support the sending of weapons or even calls for a ban on arms deliveries. Obviously, this position is objectively pro-Russian. Its result would be to push Ukraine into negotiations in a position of weakness. Some campists admit this, in the name of the primacy of the fight against NATO. Others hide behind calls for peace whose sincerity is doubtful, to say the least.

Being against war on principle, the pacifist current starts from the desire to end the war as quickly as possible. It does not necessarily share the campist vision. But this is often the case, since in Western Europe certain peace movements date from the Cold War era and were directed against US imperialism and NATO. But whether it is out of campism or simply the sincere aspiration for peace, they often arrive at the same demands as the campists: ceasefire, negotiations, no delivery of arms.

Where do these divisions come from? Let us look at the campists first. Some comrades ask why we speak of campists. It must be said that there is a touch of irony. During the Cold War, there were indeed two camps: the Soviet camp, which called itself the socialist camp, and the western US-NATO camp, which called itself the democratic camp and was correctly called by others the imperialist camp. Today, there is no longer a camp that claims to be socialist. Nobody can regard Russia as socialist or even progressive and the countries which vote with it at the United Nations are just as

indefensible, if not worse: North Korea, Syria, Iran, Eritrea, Nicaragua.

Quantitatively, the majority of campists come from Communist parties or were trained by them. Which does not mean that all Communists are campists nor that all campists are Communists. There is also a second source of campism, among those who opposed US wars after 1991. But whether before or after 1989-91 the result is the same: an ossified view of the world, ultimately dogmatic and sectarian. No need to make the concrete assessment of a concrete situation so dear to Lenin. In all circumstances, the main enemy is US imperialism. It is enough to apply this assumption to any situation, deforming reality as required. For example, by demanding the withdrawal of several hundred US soldiers from Syria, without saying a word about the Russian and Iranian forces and their active participation in Assad's war against the Syrian and Kurdish peoples.

True pacifists, unlike campists who hide behind calls for peace, are something else. We may think that they are naive. In an interview with *Médiapart* at the start of the war, the French philosopher Etienne Balibar, a strong supporter of Ukraine, noted: "Pacifism is not an option". In fact, in a war, pacifism is never an option. Trying to end a war as soon as possible, regardless of the context, can lead to the worst results. On the other hand, in times of peace, campaigning against war in general is quite respectable, without necessarily being effective. Conducting campaigns of information and action against nuclear weapons is more than useful.

What characterizes the internationalist current in the face of war? To precisely make a concrete analysis, to define the nature of the war. If it is a war of national liberation or a war of national defense, then support to those who fight against oppression. Support to those who are oppressed and exploited and help to their resistance and their right to

self-determination. In the specific case of the current war, it is a war of defense, national and democratic. The Ukrainian left is therefore a thousand times right to participate in the defense of its country. The real Ukrainian left, not the pro-Russian “left”. In passing, we can again refer to Lenin, who is said to have been against the slogan of defense of the fatherland. This is inaccurate. In 1914 he was against the use of this slogan as a justification for supporting one’s own imperialism. But not against the slogan as such, when it was a question of national wars, as he later made clear.

We might add that the internationalists are not giving lessons from afar to those who are fighting. We are currently witnessing campists and pacifists who do not limit themselves to calls for a ceasefire and negotiations. The Ukrainians are also called upon to make concessions, compromise and to take into account the interests of Russia. Campists are the worst and their advice is mostly given from the comfort of the countries of the imperialist core of the European Union. We may wonder what political or moral right they have to do that. We are consoled by the observation that they have less and less respect and credibility in Eastern Europe.

Appendix: Ever heavier weapons

Le Quotidien (March 30, 2023)

Recent deliveries of tanks and long-range rockets illustrate how the West is adapting to Kyiv’s needs.

From the start of the Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukrainians benefited from the first deliveries of weapons by the West. Between February and March, they received more than 40,000 light weapons, 17,000 manpads – portable surface-to-air defense systems – as well as equipment (25,000 helmets, 30,000 bulletproof vests, etc.), according to data from the Kiel Institute which has listed since the beginning of the war the weapons promised and delivered to Ukraine. Greece notably has

sent 20,000 Kalashnikov AK-47s, the United States 6000 manpads , 5000 Colt M4 carbines and 2000 Javelin portable anti-tank missiles , Sweden 10,000 manpads , the Czech Republic 5000 Vz58 assault rifles and 3 20 Vz59 machine guns.

In an emergency, these lightweight weapons and equipment are easy to deliver, pick up, and move across the battlefield. Faced with fierce resistance in Kyiv and Kharkiv, the country's second city, the Russian army withdrew at the end of March to concentrate its efforts on the territories of Donbas and the south.

In April, artillery deliveries began (howitzers, rocket launchers, etc.), capable of striking behind enemy lines to reach ammunition stocks and block Russian logistics chains. There were delivered until the autumn 321 howitzers, including 18 French Caesar guns, 120 infantry vehicles, 49 multiple rocket launchers, 24 combat helicopters, more than 1,000 American drones, as well as 280 Soviet-made tanks, sent mainly by Poland, which the Ukrainian army is accustomed to using.

The armor arrives

Despite its withdrawal to the east and south of the country, Russia has been conducting parallel waves of air strikes (kamikaze missiles and drones) on energy infrastructure and urban centers, well beyond the front. To deal with this, the Ukrainians were asking for missile defense systems. The United States has provided eight systems, the United Kingdom six, Spain four and Germany one. Washington recently ended up agreeing to deliver to Kyiv its Patriot medium-range surface-to-air missile system, considered one of the best anti-aircraft defense devices in Western armies.

In recent months, trench warfare has taken hold in Bakhmut and Ukraine feared a major Russian offensive with the arrival of conscripts. Against this background, Kyiv got heavy and modern Western tanks, long demanded, in order to seize the initiative

and get out of the war of attrition. Several Western countries promised at the end of January to deliver them: Washington announced Abrams tanks, London Challenger 2s, Berlin Leopard 2s, reputed to be among the best in the world. The green light from Germany has also allowed other countries to promise Leopard 2s, of which Poland has sent 14.

Until now, Kyiv only had Soviet-made tanks and lost a lot of them. Western tanks are more technologically efficient with more precise sighting systems, on-board electronics… On Monday, the first deliveries of armored vehicles by London, Washington and Berlin were confirmed.

Promised by the United States in early February, long-range GLSDB rockets were also provided, according to Russian claims not denied by Kyiv. Ukraine considers these munitions, with a range of up to 150 kilometers, crucial to launch its next counter-offensive and threaten Russian positions far behind the front lines.

Murray Smith Sunday 16 July 2023

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Photo of Internationalism in action, Welsh union members and politicians hand over supplies to Ukrainian miners in Pavlograd https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-russia-uk-trade-unions-solidarity-support/ Photo by Mick Antoniw

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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.

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