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War in Ukraine

# I'm a Ukrainian Socialist. Here's Why I Resist the Russian Invasion.

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**As a socialist and internationalist, I abhor war. But the basic premise of self-determination justifies the resistance of ordinary Ukrainians to Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of our country.**

I'm writing from Ukraine, where I serve in the Territorial Defense Forces. A year ago, I couldn't have expected to be in this situation. Like millions of Ukrainians my life has been upturned by the chaos of war.

For the past four months, I have had the opportunity to meet people whom I would hardly have met under other circumstances. Some of them had never thought of taking up arms before February 24, but the Russian invasion forced them to drop everything and go to protect their families.

We often criticize the actions of the Ukrainian government and the way defense is organized. But they do not question the necessity of resistance and understand well why and for what we are fighting.

At the same time, during these months, I've tried to follow and participate in the discussions of the international left about the Russian-Ukrainian war. And the main thing that I now feel from these discussions is fatigue and disappointment. Too much time being forced to rebut obviously false Russian propaganda, too much time explaining why Moscow had no "legitimate security concerns" to justify war, too much time asserting the basic premises of self-determination that any leftist should already agree with.

Perhaps most striking about many of these debates about the Russian-Ukrainian war is the ignoring of the opinion of Ukrainians. Ukrainians are still often presented in some left-wing discussions either as passive victims who should be sympathized with or as Nazis who should be condemned. But the far right makes up a clear minority of the Ukrainian resistance, while the absolute majority of Ukrainians support the resistance and do not want to be just passive victims.

## Negotiations

Among even many well-intentioned people in recent months, there's been increasingly loud but ultimately vague calls for negotiations and a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. But what exactly does this mean? Negotiations between Ukraine and Russia took place for several months following the invasion, but they did not stop the war. Before that, negotiations on Donbas had lasted for more than seven years with French and German participation; but despite signed agreements and a cease-fire, the conflict was never resolved. On the other hand, in a war between two states, even the terms of surrender are usually settled at the negotiating table.

A call for diplomacy in itself means nothing if we don't address negotiating positions, concrete concessions, and the willingness of the parties to adhere to any signed agreement. All of this directly depends on the course of hostilities, which in turn depends on the extent of international military aid. And this can speed up the conclusion of a just peace.

The situation in the occupied territories of southern Ukraine indicates that Russian troops are trying to establish a permanent position there because they provide Russia with a land corridor to Crimea. The Kremlin uses the grain looted in these territories to support its client regimes and simultaneously threatens the whole world with famine by

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blocking Ukrainian ports. The agreement on unblocking the export of Ukrainian grain, signed on July 22 in Istanbul, was violated by Russia the day after it was signed by attacking the Odessa Sea Trade Port with missiles.

Meanwhile, high-ranking Russian politicians, such as the former president and current deputy chairman of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, or the head of Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, [continue to write](#) that Ukraine must be destroyed. There is no reason to believe that Russia will stop its territorial expansion, even if one day it becomes beneficial for the Kremlin to sign a temporary truce.

On the other hand, 80 percent of Ukrainians [consider](#) territorial concessions unacceptable. For Ukrainians, giving up the occupied territories means betraying their fellow citizens and relatives, and putting up with the daily abductions and tortures perpetrated by occupiers. Under these conditions, the parliament will not ratify cession, even if the West forces the Ukrainian government to agree to territorial losses. This would only discredit President Volodymyr Zelensky and lead to the reelection of more nationalist authorities, while the far right would be rewarded with favorable conditions for recruiting new members.

Zelensky's government, of course, is neoliberal. Ukrainian leftists and trade unionists have organized extensively against his [social and economic policies](#). However, in terms of war and nationalism, Zelensky is the most moderate politician who could have come to power in Ukraine after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas.

There's been some misunderstanding about his own record, too. For example, many authors now blame Zelensky for the nationalist language policy, centered around restrictions on the Russian language in the public sphere and including restriction of secondary education in the languages of national minorities. In fact, these language laws were adopted during the previous term of parliament's just that individual provisions of these laws came into force after Zelensky took office. His government has repeatedly tried to soften them, but each time backed down after nationalist protests.

This was evident after the beginning of the invasion in his frequent appeals to the Russians, his invitation to the Kremlin to negotiate, and his statements that the Ukrainian army would not try to retake the territories that were under Russian control before February 24 but would seek their return through diplomatic means in the future. If Zelensky were replaced by someone more nationalistic, the situation would become much worse.

I hardly need to spell out the consequences of that outcome. There would be even more authoritarianism in our domestic politics, revanchist sentiments will prevail, and the war would not stop. Any new government would be much less restrained from shelling Russian territory. With a reinvigorated far right, our country would be dragged ever deeper into a maelstrom of nationalism and reaction.

As someone who has seen the horrors of this war, I understand the desire for it to be over as soon as possible. Indeed, no one is more eager for the war to end than we who live in Ukraine, but it is also important to Ukrainians how exactly the war will end. At the beginning of the war, I too hoped that the Russian antiwar movement would force the Kremlin to end its invasion. But unfortunately this didn't happen. Today, the Russian antiwar movement can only influence the situation by carrying out the small-scale [sabotage of railways](#), military factories, and so on. Something bigger will be possible only after the military defeat of Russia.

Of course, under certain circumstances, it might be appropriate to agree to a cease-fire. But such a cease-fire would only be temporary. Any Russian success would strengthen Vladimir Putin's regime and its reactionary tendencies. It would not mean peace, but decades of instability, guerrilla resistance in the occupied territories, and recurrent clashes on the demarcation line. It would be a disaster not only for Ukraine but also for Russia, where a reactionary

political drift would intensify and the economy would suffer from sanctions, with severe consequences for ordinary civilians.

A military defeat of the Russian invasion is therefore also in the interests of the Russians. Only a mass domestic movement for change can open the possibility for the restoration of stable relations between Ukraine and Russia in the future. But if Putin's regime is victorious, that revolution will be impossible for a long time. Its defeat is necessary for the possibility of progressive changes in Ukraine, Russia, and the entire post-Soviet world.

## What Socialists Should Do

It's worth acknowledging that my focus has been largely on the domestic dimensions for both Ukrainians and Russians of the current conflict. For many leftists abroad, discussions tend to focus on its wider geopolitical implications. But in my opinion, in assessing the conflict, socialists should first of all pay attention to the people directly involved in it. And secondly, many leftists underestimate the threats posed by the possible success of Russia.

The decision to oppose the Russian occupation was not made by Joe Biden, nor by Zelensky, but by the Ukrainian people, who rose en masse in the first days of the invasion and lined up for weapons. Had Zelensky capitulated then, he would only have been discredited in the eyes of most of society, but the resistance would have continued in a different form, led by hard-line nationalist forces.

Besides, as Volodymyr Artiukh [has noted](#) in *Jacobin*, the West did not want this war. The United States did not want problems in Europe because it wanted to focus on the confrontation with China. Even less did Germany and France want this war. Although Washington has done a lot to undermine international law (we, like socialists anywhere in the world, will never forget the criminal invasion of Iraq, for instance), by supporting Ukrainian resistance to the invasion they are doing the right thing.

To put it in historical terms, the war in Ukraine is no more a proxy war than the Vietnam War was a proxy war between the United States on one side and the Soviet Union and China on the other. And yet, at the same time, it was also a national liberation war of the Vietnamese people against the United States as well as a civil war between supporters of North and South Vietnam. Almost every war is multilayered; its nature can change during its course. But what does this give us in practical terms?

During the Cold War, internationalists did not need to laud the USSR to support the Vietnamese struggle against the United States. And it is unlikely that any socialists would have advised left-wing dissidents in the Soviet Union to oppose support for the Vietcong. Should Soviet military support for Vietnam have been resisted because the USSR criminally suppressed the Prague Spring of 1968? Why then, when it comes to Western support for Ukraine, are the murderous occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq considered serious counterarguments for aid?

Instead of seeing the world as being composed solely of geopolitical camps, socialist internationalists must evaluate every conflict based on the interests of working people and their struggle for freedom and equality. The revolutionary Leon Trotsky once [wrote](#) that, hypothetically, if fascist Italy pursuing their interests had supported the anti-colonial uprising in Algeria against democratic France, the internationalists should have supported the Italian arming of the rebels. It sounds quite right, and this did not stop him from being an anti-fascist.

Vietnam's struggle did not just benefit Vietnam; the defeat of the United States there had a significant (if temporary) deterrent effect on American imperialism. The same is true with Ukraine. What will Russia do if Ukraine is defeated?

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What would prevent Putin from conquering Moldova or other post-Soviet states?

US hegemony has had terrible consequences for humanity and it's thankfully now in decline. However, an end of US supremacy can mean either a transition to a more democratic and just international order or a war of all against all. It can also mean a return to the policy of imperialist spheres of influence and the military redrawing borders, as in previous centuries.

The world will become even more unjust and dangerous if non-Western imperialist predators take advantage of American decline to normalize their aggressive policies. Ukraine and Syria are examples of what a "multipolar world" will be like if the appetites of non-Western imperialisms are not reduced.

The longer this horrible conflict in Ukraine goes on, the more popular discontent in Western countries could grow as a result of the economic difficulties of the war and sanctions. Capital, which does not like the loss of profits and wants to return to "business as usual," may try to exploit this situation. It can also be used by right-wing populists who do not mind sharing spheres of influence with Putin.

But for socialists to use this discontent to demand less aid to Ukraine and less pressure on Russia would be a rejection of solidarity with the oppressed.

26 July 2022

Source [Jacobin](#).

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